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Is Japan a Multilingual Society?

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Introduction

The term “multilingualism” is not a new concept, as it has been often discussed in connection with the birth of modern nation states during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Yet lately, particularly since the 1980s, the term multilingualism has often been included in the titles of books and articles. In the 1980s multilingualism emerged as a topic of wide discussion, when minority-language scholars began to be concerned with the vanishing state of their target languages and to seek for conditions to accommodate and revive them in a majority society. Multilingualism was a good term for them to use to describe their demands with respect to the self-definition of a state. The term connotes, presumably, beside the recognition of the existence of minority languages in the territory, the official positive policy for their existence and progress. In recent years, however, multilingualism has become again an issue of concern in connection with immigrant languages. In Japan, the term “multilingual society” (*tagengo shakai*) has been frequently used during the last decade or so in titles of books discussing the present state of Japan.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the term “multilingualness” or multilingualism, and then discuss the present linguistic situation of Japan in this respect, which is strongly associated with the country’s increasing ethnic diversity. The main concern here, however, will be placed on visible phenomena in a brief overview of the transformation of Japan into a multilingual society.¹⁾

What is Multilingualism?

As suggested above, we are mainly concerned here with multilingualism presupposing the multinational (multiethnic) nature of society.

Yet the term demands a further definition, as Runblom distinguishes between two distinctive implications in the term multiculturalism (Runblom, 1995: 199–200)²⁾. Here I also tentatively apply this principle in defining multilingualism: (1) objectively, a situation of a society characterized by a multitude of languages (i.e. the existence of more than one language) and, (2) normatively, an ideal situation of peaceful co-existence between these languages. Needless to say, there are plenty of cases in which languages (or speakers of different languages) enter a situation of conflict or even fierce struggle with each other.

Multilingual states can basically be classified into two types. One is traditional,

regional multilingualism, where languages are spoken in their traditional inherent areas. In other words a linguistic community is confined within an area where its concentration is “relatively” high. The sizes of linguistic areas may vary greatly, and the spatial inter-relation among linguistic communities may be also manifold due to many historical and political reasons. Many regional multilingual states go back to the birth of modern nation-states during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when each state was built around one nation and one language, while absorbing other minority (or indigenous) peoples and languages into its territory. Examples of such states abound.

The other multilingual situation can be found in urban areas, which from their nature have absorbed people from ancient times, and recently have been incorporating foreigners (immigrants) from all over the world. The linguistic situation here is generally multiple, although some linguistic communities have a tendency to be concentrated in certain areas. Different languages are used in a single area, often reflecting functional and ethnic divisions within society. Nowadays, globalization has made it usual for people in many urban areas of the world to interact with other languages as a part of their everyday lives. This also holds true for Japan.

In this paper I shall first address the development of the multilingual situation in Japan brought about by immigrants during the last century. I shall then proceed to examine the other face of multilingualism, i.e. what is happening among Japanese, the majority people of the host society.

The Multilingual Situation in Japan

Needless to say, Japan has been a multilingual society since ancient times. Here, however, we are concerned with the multilingual situation that seemingly broke out “suddenly” with the “sudden” increase of foreigners from the later half of the 1980s. Prior to this sudden increase in the number of foreigners there had been a remarkable number of so-called “oldcomer” foreigners, mainly Koreans, whose linguistic impact on Japan’s multilingualism had been minimal, both in the objective and normative senses. The reason for this was presumably strongly linked to the indifferent attitude of the Japanese at that time.

During the last three decades or so Japan has seen a massive influx of foreigners, which actually has been in accordance with the international phenomenon generally called “globalization.” In 2000 the total number of foreigners increased by 130,000 over the previous year in spite of Japan’s long economic slump, reaching 1,686,400, almost double the corresponding figure 15 years before. The total figure as of 2005 was 2,011,555, and the actual figure must be much greater if those in the so-called undocumented categories are included. By nationality, the largest group is Koreans (598,687), followed by Chinese (519,561), Brazilians (302,080), Filipinos (187,261), Peruvians (57,728), Americans (49,390), and others.

Ethnic Clusters

An interesting point from the standpoints of both visible ethnic economic activities and visible ethnic linguistic activities is the phenomenon of ethnic clusters, where foreigners concentrate to form distinctive ethnic areas. Earlier immigrants, mostly prior to the 1940s, formed the so-called Korean towns and Chinatowns in the immediate vicinity of major cities. These include Korean clusters in Ikuno (Osaka), Nagata (Kobe), Kawasaki (Kanagawa), and Chinatowns in Kobe and Yokohama. Compared with the Chinatowns, the Korean clusters have been rather less visible in regard to their linguistic activities due to the historical discriminatory attitude of the majority Japanese toward Koreans.

In recent years, notable ethnic clusters composed mainly of Brazilian and Peruvian settlers have emerged in several parts of Japan, less in major cities than in medium-sized regional industrial cities. Some of the localities with a high foreigner concentration in 2005 were Oizumi (Gunma Prefecture) with 15.8 percent of the total population; Minokamo (Gifu Prefecture), 9.6 percent; Kosei (Shizuoka Prefecture), 7.9 percent; Ohta (Gunma Prefecture), 4.9 percent; and Konan (Shiga Prefecture), 5.8 percent.³⁾ In these areas, ethnic businesses such as restaurants, food shops, video shops and even supermarkets with attractive signboards in native languages are often found surrounding dense ethnic residential districts.

In addition, highly visible ethnic enclaves have been also growing in inner cities, mostly through the activities of newcomers. The most famous is the Okubo-Shin-Okubo Korean town in Tokyo, which also includes Chinese and other Asian nationalities, where hundreds of ethnic businesses are flourishing and supplying most of the needs of daily life. One remarkable point is the large number of signboards written solely in Korean, which suggests the existence of Koreans as at least one of the area's main ethnic groups. Similar areas are also to be found in Osaka.

Immigrant Languages and Immigrant Communities

The ethnic diversification described above has inevitably brought many languages along with their speakers. There are, however, no official data as to how many languages are spoken by how many people in Japan. Japan has been unwilling to obtain precise statistics for these data through the general census, which targets all residents of Japan. The census does not include questions concerning languages, despite the fact that the questionnaires are available in 18 different languages upon request. These include Russian, Thai, Hindu, Arabian, Persian, Burmese, and Indonesian.

There are, however, secondary sources that can help provide at least a rough estimate of the number of languages spoken in Japan and the relative numbers of speakers of each language, particularly for newcomers, in relation to other languages. The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) compiles annual statistics on students who require extra teaching in *Japanese* at school. The

statistics include data about their mother tongues or national languages. According to the 2004 data, those who needed Japanese-learning support numbered 19,678 in 5,346 schools. They represented 65 languages, of which Portuguese (7,033 speakers, 35.7 percent), Chinese (4,628, 23.5 percent), Spanish (2,926, 14.9 percent) and Filipino (1,779, 9.1 percent) were spoken by 83.1 percent of these children.

We need, however, to treat these proportions of mother-tongue speakers with care in calculating the rate of real mother-tongue speakers of each immigrant language. The 4.6 percent of children for whom Korean is their mother tongue, for example, does not correspond with the proportion of Korean speakers in Japan, as many of the newcomers are comparatively young and single, and do not have school-age children.

This means that we must admit that we lack even the basic knowledge for studying the multilingual situation of Japan. This is partly due to the reluctance of the Japanese authorities to pay attention to the existence of these languages, and partly to people's generally indifferent attitude toward other languages.

How are Immigrant Languages Used?

How, then, are these immigrant languages used by immigrants themselves in Japan? And in what kinds of situations do Japanese come into contact with these languages? Language behaviors and attitudes concerning immigrant languages vary considerably among immigrant groups. It must also be remarked that modes of immigrant language use may be strongly affected by the attitude of the majority population.

As yet, linguistic activities, particularly the use of immigrant languages, have not been extensively or systematically studied in Japan, with the exception of a few isolated cases. Here I try to categorize tentatively the linguistic activities of immigrants into three basic types according to the mode and degree of contact with the majority. I distinguish between these types according to my assumption that the degree and mode of contact with the majority, and their possible reactions, may in turn influence immigrants' linguistic activities both positively and negatively.

1. Socially overt linguistic activities (i.e. visible to the Japanese population) in public domains (such as public transportation, streets, shops, and the facades and advertisements of ethnic businesses).
2. Covert linguistic activities (usually invisible to Japanese) in private domains (such as the home, private conversation with friends, closed religious activities, ethnic clubs, private language schools).
3. In-between activities, where interaction is possible between immigrants and Japanese (such as local or communal activities including immigrant groups, public schools, ethnic radio broadcasts, ethnic shops, restaurants, ethnic media).

Linguistically these activities may differ from each other at most in regard to, for example, style and vocabulary, so their purely linguistic features play a minimum role here. The speakers do not usually expect Japanese to understand their languages. It is rather the question of the openness and “closedness” of language activities toward Japanese, since immigrants are supposedly sensitive to Japanese attitudes.

Socially overt activities generally occupy only a superficial and small part of the entirety of immigrants’ language activities. They have a strong impact on the host population, however, implying the multilingual reality of society. Nowadays it is not rare to encounter foreigners and foreign languages in public transportation, shops, and other public spaces. In many parts of Japan, as described above, small-scale little Koreas, Chinas and Brazils have emerged in which ethnic businesses flourish with colorful advertisements in their languages. Occasionally, overt linguistic activities play a prominent role as an ethnic symbol. During situations when they have provoked a negative reaction from the majority, however, they may mostly disappear.

Socially covert activities, on the contrary, may constitute a more salient and diverse aspect of immigrants’ linguistic activities, deeply rooted in the ethnic community. A host language, for example, will rarely substitute for ethnic languages in religious activities. These activities are seemingly least affected by the attitudes of the majorities. In some immigrant communities, however, a language shift is observed even among children of first-generation parents. The “oldcomer” Koreans are a well-known example. Extensive sociolinguistic study of major immigrant languages will be required to understand the present multilingual situation of Japan.

The third category, which falls between the two categories described above, comprises significant activities that support immigrants’ public networks. Activities in this category often establish recognized positions for ethnic languages in society and reinforce linguistic interaction between ethnic groups, including the majority population. Printed media in minority languages, which often have a weak economic basis, numbered more than 150 titles in 16 languages in 2005, according to my personal data.

Multilingual Reactions among the Host Population

Contacts with immigrants and immigrant languages have aroused notable reactions among the host population, especially since the 1990s, that had perhaps not been observed earlier, particularly when compared with the case of oldcomer immigrants. Some of the reactions are visible, and others invisible but possibly more substantial. I shall first address visible changes among the majority population.

Multilingual Support: Official and Voluntary

Only a few years ago all information for foreigners was only available in English, if at all. Since the late 1980s a range of information has begun to appear in several immigrant

languages at some municipal offices. Thanks to painstaking efforts by staff on the front line, who had to overcome both technical and bureaucratic barriers, these unorganized, sporadic early translations were usually to give first-hand information to foreign clients who were at a loss, and to save municipal staff from being taken aback at their sudden appearance. Linguistic intermediaries were also needed to prevent and solve a variety of conflicts between local inhabitants and newcomers with no knowledge of Japanese. The numbers of incidents and victims quickly showed that many immigrants were suffering from language barriers in addition to institutional and juridical barriers, being unable to exercise their rights or blocked from receiving services such as medical care.

Multilingual services at the municipal level have improved notably overall during the past decade. Printed multilingual materials in particular (such as general guides for residents, information on administrative procedures, emergency guides) are now abundant and seem to suffice for the needs of foreigners to some extent, in terms of both quality and quantity. Depending on local immigrants, materials are translated usually into (after English) Chinese, Korean, and Portuguese, and in lesser degree into Vietnamese, Spanish and Filipino. The problem is rather that these materials are not always available everywhere and sufficiently utilized, which may indicate some remaining reluctance on the part of local authorities.

Toward Mother Tongue Education

Among major language policies for minorities, the most salient is perhaps mother tongue education, or how (or whether) the authority guarantees minority children the possibility of acquiring competence in their mother tongue. Mother tongue maintenance is generally assumed to be crucial both for immigrants' individual and communal well-being. Mother tongue education is implemented, though in varying modes, in most states where multiculturalism has been adopted as the basic principle for integrating immigrants, including Australia, Canada, and some Scandinavian countries.

In Japan, protection of and support for non-Japanese mother tongues is, at least at a public level, reluctantly taken into consideration. This is apparently due to legislative and institutional restrictions. (Non-Japanese citizens are not obliged to attend compulsory education, but mother tongue rights are not recognized under Japanese law.)

Instead, Koreans (mostly those with ties to North Korea) have a 50-year history of operating private schools up to university level in which all instruction is given in Korean. Now, to meet the obvious needs of immigrant children, some private schools and complementary classes are operating in Portuguese and Filipino without official recognition.

In addition, local minority and Japanese volunteers are running a number of make-shift mother tongue classes, the number of which is unknown. Mother tongue teaching is also carried out, secondarily and rather covertly, thanks to spot teachers, in the framework of official Japanese language complementary classes for immigrant children.

What Has Changed, What Is Going to Change: Invisible Reactions

The most remarkable and obvious change is that Japanese people now have virtually everyday contact with foreigners and foreign languages, a situation that could not even have been imagined in the 1970s. What changes, then, have contact with immigrants brought? As described above, initial linguistic contacts with foreign languages usually concern foreigners' overt language activities. Hearing a foreign language repeatedly may force people to face up to the reality of linguistic diversification, which they might never have expected to happen in Japan. Thirty years ago people would stand and stare at the very sight of a foreigner, as if they were divided by an invisible barrier. The accumulation of such experiences means people start to accept foreign languages as part of their community.

The multilingual nature of an individual is perhaps less a matter of his or her multilingual competence or activity, but more of the person's attitude toward other languages. According to H. Lehtonen (2007), a Finnish researcher of immigrant languages, any monolingual pupil in a multiethnic school, where pupils may hear up to five languages during the school day, can be regarded as multilingual.

Apart from the multilingual phenomena caused directly by foreigners' linguistic activities, linguistic diversification is also found among the Japanese population in terms of their competence in foreign languages, although these should not be considered to be central in multilingualism. Multilingual competence among the majority population may have a strong connection with immigrant languages.

Although immigrants usually adopt (or try to adopt) Japanese, the majority language of the host society, immigrant languages too are modestly and slowly coming into use by Japanese speakers, through established family connections and culture, business or voluntary activities. Nowadays it is not rare to find people who can function in an immigrant language. Family ties, or even spontaneous connections, with immigrants and their cultures may eliminate prejudice toward them, and evoke the motivation to learn their language.⁴⁾

Previously, particularly from the 1970s, a similar role was played by the so-called *kikokushijo*, usually school-age returnees who came back to Japan after spending several years with their families overseas. They were believed to have a positive effect in terms of "internationalizing" their fellow students by sharing their foreign experiences with them. School administrators have tried to involve them in the internationalization of the school system by such means as lowering their enrollment criteria and establishing classes for maintaining or developing their foreign language skills. It is not known, however, how far they have really contributed to internationalizing their peers by encouraging them to speak foreign languages. In any case, as we have seen above, their expected role of "internationalizing" the Japanese was at least partially fulfilled by immigrants themselves.

Conclusion and Reflections on Multilingualism

Returning now to our first question, is Japan a multilingual society? Japan is indisputably moving toward becoming a multiethnic society. This has brought about a de facto situation, which we may call “multilingualization,” in which several languages are spoken and used by residents within the border of the Japanese state.

Increasing contacts with foreigners and their languages are, step by step, diminishing peoples’ mental barriers, which are heavily loaded by language consciousness. Accordingly, local authorities have begun to recognize this state of affairs, and have taken measures to accommodate the linguistic needs of foreigners. Japanese people are also becoming more multilingual themselves in terms of their competence in foreign languages. Contacts with immigrants may be one factor influencing this trend.

Although the general stand of the government is still far from promoting multilingualism in Japan, the government’s language policies towards immigrants may suddenly change to support, for example, mother tongue education. The widely accepted notion of language rights, the pressures of general opinion or even the accumulation of individual cases of language problems may force the government to do so, despite its overriding ideology that Japan should be a mono-ethnic, monolingual state.

Is Japan then a multilingual society? As we know from numerous cases, nationalistic pressure is currently exerting a retrograde effect on Japanese language policies, particularly by promoting the status of the Japanese language both in its symbolic and substantial senses. If this is due to the fear of multilingualism, multilingualism must be believed to have taken root in Japanese society to such an extent that it calls for preventive reactions.

Notes

- 1) For further discussion see Shoji (2003).
- 2) Runblom talks about multiculturalism including also languages.
- 3) <http://homepage2.nifty.com/shujutoshi/>
- 4) Of course it would be an exaggeration to say that all foreign-language learners are motivated by the prospect of linguistic exchanges with immigrants. A case in point is the boom in the study of Korean, which is influenced by the popularity of Korean popular culture.

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