

**FROM *KOKUGO* TO *NIHONGO* IN THE CONTEXT OF THE HISTORY OF THE
JAPANESE LANGUAGE
and
ATTITUDES TOWARD ENGLISH IN JAPAN IN RELATION TO ENGLISH AS A
GLOBAL LANGUAGE**

Thesis

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ABSTRACT

ABSTRACT 1

From Kokugo to Nihongo in the Context of the History of the Japanese Language

The development and transition of kokugo to the modern nihongo was nothing short of a political movement pioneered by the Japanese government. Despite the lack of intent to change the name from kokugo to nihongo in 1997, the official name change of the Japanese language occurred in 2004, after members of the board of the Society of Japanese Linguistics voted by majority to proceed with the change. Though it may not have been a deliberate attempt to jumpstart internationalization and modernization in Japan, the change from kokugo to nihongo contributed to the rise of Japan on an international scale, providing an opening for people all over the world to pay attention to and gain interest in Japan and specifically, the Japanese language. In understanding how a simple change of a term could possibly have such profound effects on a country, this paper delves into the linguistic intricacies and cultural nuances that both kokugo and nihongo represent, and how a country's national language is able to shape the way a country functions.

ABSTRACT 2

Attitudes Toward English in Japan in Relation to English as a Global Language

In the history of Japanese education, English education has played a large role in the development of Japan's education system and Japan's international status. During the English Boom in the first part of the Meiji Era, the desire to learn English was closely tied with the drive to radicalize and jumpstart government, politics, and economics. After the capital of Japan transitioned from Kyoto to Tokyo in 1868, a period that is known as the Meiji Ishin, or Meiji Restoration, took place. The goal of the process was to ultimately 'westernize' Japan. However, despite governmental efforts to utilize the English language as a means of catching up to and operating on the same global level as the West, Japanese citizens found themselves fighting the urge to master the English language. Although it may be true that had the Japanese government chosen to abolish Japanese as the national language and instead adopt English, that perhaps Japan would be able to rise to the same level of power and world status as the United States stands today, there is also the difficult and problematic question of race and the linguistic superiority complex that native English speakers hold. This paper attempts to suggest that in lieu of encouraging, to the point of mandating, linguistic homogeneity to level out an international playing field, encouraging linguistic diversity may instead be the key.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Cordelia Jin graduated from Cornell University with a Bachelor of Science degree in Communication, with a concentration in Information Science. During her time at Cornell, Cordelia was heavily involved in research with her lab, the Group and Interpersonal Communication lab led by Professor Poppy McLeod. Cordelia was also highly involved on-campus in numerous professional and student organizations, including the CALS Honors Society and the National Society of Collegiate Scholars. She also served as a dedicated member of the community service organization Alpha Phi Omega, and as a Resident Advisor for three years.

During the summers of her time in college, Cordelia participated in internships across Japan with two organizations. The first internship was held at Kozmoz International, a private English conversation-focused school and tutoring center for Japanese students local to the Kyoto area in Japan. At Kozmoz International, Cordelia gained experiences in private English conversation tutoring as well as leading English classes for students ranging in ages from kindergarten age to senior citizen age. In the two summers following her experience in Kyoto, Cordelia interned as an English teaching assistant and tutor at Ibaraki Christian University located in Ibaraki, Japan. These teaching experiences provided Cordelia with valuable insight into teaching English as a second language and teaching English to non-native speakers of English. They also prompted Cordelia to gain an increased interest in English education in Japan in particular, and to pursue further research on the topic.

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CHAPTER 1

FROM *KOKUGO* TO *NIHONGO* IN THE CONTEXT OF THE HISTORY OF THE JAPANESE LANGUAGE

Introduction

The development and transition of *kokugo* to the modern *nihongo* was nothing short of a political movement pioneered by the Japanese government. In 2004, the board of the Society of Japanese Linguistics conducted a vote to see if a name change for the Society would be necessary. As it turned out, 66.3% of the members, or 776 members, voted to change the name. That is, 31.4% of the members, or 367 members, voted against changing the name. Interestingly enough, in 1997 at the same annual meeting of the Society, the majority voted against changing the name (Toshiki, 2010).

What changed from 1997 to 2004 to allow for the passing of the name change of the Society of Japanese Linguistics in 2004? The very fact that the *Kokugo Gakkai*, or the ‘Society of the Study of Japanese,’ was renamed the *Nihongo Gakkai*, was more than just a simple renaming and was an entire action and example of rebranding. One could argue that it was the result of modernization and Japan’s attempts to enter the international world, that the *Kokugo Gakkai* developed into what is known today as the *Nihongo Gakkai*. Though the name change was not a deliberate attempt at jumpstarting the modernization of Japan, I would argue that the action of the name change contributed to the rise of Japan on an international scale.

Kokugo and Nihongo

During the process of the creation of *kokugo* in the Meiji era, there was much discourse over *genbun itchi*, the unification of the Japanese written and spoken languages (Kawato, 2014), and the effects of the actual creation of and transition to *kokugo*. Even though the word *kokugo* had already existed prior to the Meiji period, the modern use of the word became more well-known during the Meiji period. *Kokugo* in the modern sense generally refers to the opposite of *kango* or Sino-Japanese vocabulary from China. Similarly, Kamei Takahashi presented that *kokugo* can also be used to refer to the opposing concept to *kanbun*, which refers to Chinese-style Japanese language (Lee, 2010).

In terms of the nuances between the study of the national language, *kokugogaku*, and the study of the Japanese language, *nihongogaku*, it is interesting to note differences in their instruction. *Kokugogaku* is often referred to as a “philological and diachronic study of the Japanese language.” In other words, *kokugogaku* refers to the study of the Japanese language in a more overall historical context. On the other hand, *nihongogaku* is “a descriptive and synchronic study of the Japanese language,” that is, a branch of study focused on specifically, particle usage in the language, and grammatical structures in the language (Toshiki, 2010). *Nihongogaku* appears to be focused more on the Japanese language itself in terms of structure and rules, whereas *kokugogaku* has the sense of nationalistic pride and love for the country of Japan that *nihongogaku* does not seem to harbor. To have studied in the era when the national language of Japan was called *kokugo* would translate differently to those who studied Japanese after the transition from *kokugo* to *nihongo*.

Linguistic Differences between Kokugo and Nihongo

It is imperative to note that the word *kokugo* itself is not rooted in native Japanese. That is, *kokugo* consists of two words: *ko*, which means ‘nation’ and *go*, which is ‘language.’ These two words are in fact classical Chinese *kanji* characters that were adapted into the Japanese language. In this sense, the argument that the Japanese language can never fully be completely free and independent from the Chinese language holds true. The Japanese language will always have its connections to the Chinese language, as its history is rooted in Chinese. Additionally, the people of Japan originally adopted Classical Chinese as the official written language in Japan once upon a time, which is referred to as *kango* (Lee, 2010).

Ramsey (2004) states that it is no coincidence that *kokugo* appears to have a “venerable Chinese ancestry.” In China, the term became *guóyǔ*, a term that continues to be used today in Taiwan, due to Japanese influence as a matter of fact. Other terms throughout history that were coined by the Japanese in Japan using Chinese characters were later adopted by the Chinese as seemingly Chinese words that had originated in China. It is ironic that modern Chinese utilizes many words that originated in Japan through the adoption of Chinese words in the Japanese language (Ramsey, 2014). Some of the terms include words such as ‘imperialism’ (*teikoku-shugi* in Japanese and *dìguózhǔyì* in China) and surprisingly, even interestingly enough, the word ‘communism’ (*kyōsan-shugi* in Japanese and *gòngchǎnzhǔyì* in Chinese).

To be able to take words from an ancient, existing language and to create new words with new meanings that were never used before instilled a sense of linguistic pride for the Japanese. Without even mentioning the fact that along with adopting and altering Chinese characters to form them into Japanese characters, the Japanese also created two other writing systems – *hiragana* and *katakana*. The act of simply transforming another language into their own is

already one worth feeling prideful over. This very reason could be another way to justify part of the political move to transition from using *kokugo* to *nihongo*. It is an owning of the language that was curated in Japan by the Japanese people; perhaps it can be viewed as a desire to patent one's creations and innovations, and to separate them from the creation of the actual founders of their language.

Even though *nihongo* in Japanese is indeed spelled with Chinese characters in *kango*, the country's name is in the name of the country's language itself, so there is more of a direct relationship between *nihongo* and Japan than *kokugo* and Japan. Therefore, by coining the country of Japan's language to be *nihongo*, it is as if Japan decided to proclaim to China that they have now created their own language system and are breaking away from the country of China and the language of China. It is almost similar to an act of rebellion, and though Japan was never officially a part of China, it appears as if Japan was declaring their linguistic separation from China by breaking off the ties between their languages.

This may also relate to why many Japanese kanji characters were mostly altered even slightly from their original Chinese states to the Japanese kanji that are used today. Many of the stroke orders differ between Japanese and Chinese kanji, and oftentimes, the kanji characters are just slightly different from each other. For a person literate in Chinese to write in Japanese requires a relearning of many *kanji*; there is a necessity for the native Chinese to learn characters that were originally the characters of their native language, specifically in the Japanese way. This in itself is another area and opportunity for the Japanese to feel pride for their language and their country. There may not have been any real linguistic reason to change the original kanji, besides in the cases of making it so that the characters would be easier to write, but it is interesting to note the consequences of the altered kanji on the modern language.

Comparison of the Chinese Language and the Japanese Language

An interesting thing to pay close attention to when comparing the Chinese language to the Japanese language is the difference between the systems of romanizations used in both countries. Chinese uses *hanyu pinyin*, a phonetic system that utilizes the Roman alphabet. In comparison, Japanese uses the Hepburn Romanization, also referred to as romaji, which can be translated literally into “roman letters.” The origins of Hepburn Romanization can be traced back to Portuguese orthography, as it was adopted by Jesuit missionaries to be used in the publication of Catholic books used for preaching. The most well-known example of the bridge between Japanese romanization and Portuguese orthography can be found in the *Nippo jisho*, a Japanese-Portuguese dictionary that was written in 1603.

The Jesuits also published secular books that were in romanized Japanese such as the first edition of the Japanese classic folktale, *The Tale of the Heike*. What became known as the Hepburn Romanization system was developed in 1887, after sakoku, when Japan began accepting foreign influence again James Curtis Hepburn, used romaji in the third edition of his Japanese-English dictionary.

The importance of all this is the matter that Japanese romanization is based on English phonology and is particularly catered towards English speakers. In contrast, *hanyu pinyin* is partial towards Chinese speakers. There is a clear power dynamic at play here, as Japanese romanization serves to better assist English speakers than Japanese speakers. There is a clear distinction in that it appears that by creating a system that better serves English speakers, Japanese speakers are placing English speakers on a pedestal in a sort of hierarchical position.

Sentimental Ties to Kokugo

On a different note, to many Japanese people who studied Japanese when it was *kokugo*, the term *kokugo* sounds familiar and familial. *Kokugo* has a softer sound to it and is associated often with memories of past education starting from elementary school through middle, and high school. Since *kokugo* is the name of the Japanese language, there is a nostalgic tie to the word for those who studied during those times (Whitman, 2019). On top of this, *kokugo* was a term that people could relate to and use as their own. It was representative of the Japanese people and their language. Later, the term did transfer over to China and Korea, but the strong nationalistic pride associated with the word is said to have originated in Japan during the Meiji era (Ramsey, 2004).

When *kokugo* was, arguably, forcefully transformed into *nihongo*, the sentiments went along with the antiquated term in the long run. *kokugo* continued to have that warm, nostalgic sentiment for those who studied *kokugo*, but those very sentiments would not translate over to those who studied *nihongo*, simply because of the nature of the word, and because of the lack of context attached to the word. *Kokugo* implied that in learning one's national language, that they would be creating a relationship between themselves and their language. Additionally, it can be argued that *kokugo* was used as a political device to increase Japanese nationalistic pride (Lee, 2010). According to Lee (2010), *kokugo* as a concept, is more than a language, and is in fact, more similar to a worldview. *Kokugo* is to native Japanese speakers their language, whereas *nihongo* represents the language foreign speakers learn.

When *kokugo* was replaced by *nihongo*, the language became available not only to those living in Japan but to anyone outside of the country who also harbored an interest in learning the Japanese language. *Nihongo* is now a language that anyone can learn and master, regardless of their ethnic origins. This does not necessarily detach nor remove meaning from the learning of

the language, but certainly, that almost exclusive feeling known to those who studied Japanese as their country's language would be lost even to those of Japanese ethnic origin.

Japanese Nationalistic Pride associated with Kokugo

Regarding this point, it is important to reinforce that the Japanese were and are known for their patriotic spirit, and thus hold a lot of pride for their country and consequently their own language, so the word *kokugo* physically bound people together with and to a language that they could call their own. Even if someone, who was not of Japanese ethnicity, were to be fluent in Japanese, it would have been peculiar for them to use the term *kokugo* to refer to their knowledge of Japanese. The very fact is that the Japanese created even the idea of *kokugo*, which later became adopted by China and Korea primarily, as well as other countries. *Kokugo* is used as an in-group term and though the literal translation of the word means 'national language' in English, the real meaning behind the word is along the lines of 'our language,' our native language, or our mother tongue language (Ramsey, 2004).

The current Prime Minister of Japan Shinzo Abe mentioned in his speech to the Diet in 2007 that under his jurisdiction, he wished to make Japan a 'beautiful country.' What this idea entailed was the restoration or revitalization of Japanese pride in Japanese culture, values, traditions, history, and nature (Varma, 2007). Post-World War II, there was a definite drop in Japanese nationalism and pride. Furthermore, after natural disasters such as the Great Hanshin earthquake in 1995, and the infamous sarin gas attack also in 1995, the country suffered a sharp decrease in morale (Dickson, 2010). However, as time passed, a newly renewed self-confidence and a new type of nationalism developed in Japan (Dickinson, 1966). Abe's vision was to take this newly formed Japanese nationalism and to expand it.

According to Kamei Takashi, a prominent scholar in the 1960s, “for the Japanese there is a feeling of intimacy in the word *kokugo*.” Takashi also makes the distinction between the pronunciations of *nihongo* as its regular pronunciation *nihongo* and *nippongo*, the geminated version of *nihongo*. From a linguistic standpoint, geminate pronunciation is often associated with the pre-war military, and thus using *nippongo* sometimes includes the connotation of seeming more militaristic or nationalistic (Whitman, 2019). Takashi describes the use of *nippongo* over *nihongo* as providing a “standoffish or distant feel.”

In line with what was previously mentioned, Ramsey also makes the distinction that the Japanese can refer to their own language as *kokugo*, but if a foreigner learning or speaking Japanese referred to the language as *kokugo*, it would be nonsensical, and perhaps even insulting in some ways. This is particularly true in modern day, as the modern language of Japanese is referred to strictly as *nihongo*. In this sense, *kokugo* is also only a term that can only be used by native speakers of Japanese who are also of Japanese ancestry. This raises the question of whether or not ethnically non-Japanese people who grew up in Japan speaking the Japanese language can comfortably use the word *kokugo*. With the rise of immigration globally, more and more “foreigners” are flocking to Japan and settling down. Does the implication of *kokugo* work in the context of a child born to a once foreigner of Japan? These are questions that need to be addressed in the rise in immigration and existing xenophobia in Japan today.

Nihongo and Modernization

Naturally, with the new labeling of Japanese as *kokugo* emerged political implications. The rebranding of *kokugo* to *nihongo* is a direct result of and response to the drive towards modernization. To survive in the modern world, Japan would need to and continues to need to

open up to the rest of the world. It is imperative that the Japanese do not make rash judgments on people who may use the word *kokugo* non-ironically, and as it is today, Japan is still not entirely open to being friendly to foreigners. Japan's attitude towards those foreign to Japan can be dated back to 1899 when the Imperial Edict No. 352 prohibiting the importation of foreign labor into Japan was introduced. Although Japan has come a long way since then, the fact stands that there are still 'no foreigners allowed' signs posted in front of many bars or restaurants in the lesser urban areas in the country. Despite Japanese political efforts to increase international immigration to Japan to aid with the population decline crisis, it is difficult to change the historical mentality that many Japanese withhold to this day.

It is inevitable that with the name change of a major organization that consequences would subsequently follow. However, the name change of the Society of Japanese Linguistics was a largely intentional action taken by the Society. One could argue that the Society's motives were driven by the desire and need for political and economic flourishing. To keep up in the modern world, a country needs to be in a stable political and economic status. In a growing era where China has become such a prominent force in the global scheme, Japan must have its own political and economic weapons to remain prominent in the current world. Fueled by the desire to go along with modernization and to deem entry into the international world, Japan began by making seemingly small changes to its foundations, starting with their method of communication: the Japanese language.

How has Japan become such a glorified country of appeal to the point where it almost appears as if anyone who has the budget and time is flying to Japan for vacation? The answer of course is complicated, but when looking into the ever-so-rising popularity of Japanese media culture through anime and manga, to Japanese traditional culture through gastronomy and

cuisine, to Japanese daily life through convenience stores and vending machines, it is clear that in order to gain entry into the appealing world of Japan, one must understand the language to some degree.

The rapid increase in interest in learning the Japanese language by non-native speakers of Japanese has proven to be hugely beneficial for economics in Japan. The way it stands, the Japanese language is expanding far beyond Japan, just as Chinese and Korean are. Korean is taught across a variety of schools in the United States now as a result of the boom of Korean Pop Music, or K-Pop. Chinese is a popular commodity on the market for those interested in venturing into entrepreneurship or business. The popularity of Japanese culture and the interest in Japanese language learning is skyrocketing in this day and age. In addition, Japanese culture in the forms of anime and manga primarily, are gaining more and more popularity internationally by the day, and many foreigners are interested in studying Japanese as a result of this. This enormous curiosity and desire to understand Japanese and Japanese culture thus, in turn, leads to a boom in tourism in Japan, and economic flourishing for Japanese companies.

In fact, Japanese tourism is rising at a rate faster than in any other country in the world. Between the years 2012 and 2017, the number of international tourists visiting Japan sharply inclined by 250%. This rapid increase could also be attributed to the increased leniency in receiving visas to Japan, especially in the case of Chinese tourist visitors (Qz.com, 2018). However, in accordance with the “Survey on Japanese-Language Education Abroad” conducted in 2012 by the Japan Foundation, in 2012, the number of learners of the Japanese language had exceeded one million learners. This statistic consequently resulted in China becoming the number one country in the world with the highest number of Japanese-language learners (The Japan Foundation, 2017). Although China took third place regarding the number of

Japanese-language education institutions right behind Indonesia and South Korea in 2017, China continued to have the greatest number of Japanese-language learners. Even though China's unparalleled population is a factor that needs to be considered when considering the number of Japanese-language learners in proportion to the population, there is no doubt that there is a correlation between the rising number of Japanese-language learners and the rise of international tourism in Japan.

Conclusion

It is difficult to say that members of the Society of Japanese Linguistics could have predicted that Japanese media culture and subsequently, the desire to travel to Japan, would become the driving forces and motivations for people to study the Japanese language. It would not prove not to be as difficult to say that they could have predicted that the Japanese language would become the entrance to global modernization. Opening the opportunity and possibility of learning Japanese to the world provided Japan with a platform to succeed globally.

Though even before the transition from *kokugo* to *nihongo* Japan had already long departed from its *sakoku* days during the Tokugawa period, Japan was not in a secure place where it could compete in the modern world with countries in Europe or the United States. This was simply due to the fact that there was a language barrier between Japanese speakers and those who spoke in English in the "west." By giving foreigners the possibility, and even encouraging foreigners to pursue Japanese language study, Japan was able to enter the global world and become the only country on the Asian continent to be considered as a first world country (Worldpopulationreview.com, 2019).

As the Japanese language continues to gain more traction, especially in Europe and the United States, Japan will continue to grow economically and internationally. In addition, as the Japanese language becomes more standardized in schools where traditionally, European languages are the only foreign languages taught, Japan may see yet another influx of immigrants attempting to settle in Japan. As a matter of fact, the Japanese government is actually encouraging foreigners to study Japanese and move to Japan to provide a solution to the issue of *shōshi kōrei-ka*, or the declining birthrate and aging population crisis. Encouraging Japanese language study is surely part of the solution to this current crisis in Japan, and much to the benefit of Japan, interests in Japanese culture and the Japanese language are ever so prevalent today.

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CHAPTER 2

ATTITUDES TOWARD ENGLISH IN JAPAN IN RELATION TO ENGLISH AS A GLOBAL LANGUAGE

Introduction

In the history of Japanese education, English education has played a large role in the development of Japan's education system and Japan's international status. English education first began in the Meiji era, which can be split into two stages. The first stage may be referred to as the 'English Boom' stage, whereas the second stage may be referenced as a period of opposition to the initial English boom (Robertson & Nunn, 2006).

During the English Boom in the first part of the Meiji Era, the desire to learn English was closely tied with the drive to radicalize and jumpstart government, politics, and economics. After the capital of Japan transitioned from Kyoto to Tokyo in 1868, a period that is known as the *Meiji Ishin*, or Meiji Restoration, took place. The goal of the process was to ultimately 'westernize' Japan; the desired result was to ultimately put Japan on the same level playing field as countries in Europe and the United States – the 'West' (Columbia Uni., 2009). Japan's attempt to normalize and nationalize the English language in order for every Japanese citizen to ideally, master the language, was a clear example of Japan's ambitious stride towards westernization and modernization. Despite governmental efforts to utilize the English language as a means of catching up to and operating on the same global level as the West, Japanese citizens found themselves fighting the urge to master the English language.

In 1872, the first Minister of Education to exist in Japan, Mori Arinori, published a document, "The use of English as the official language in Japan," to attempt to persuade the Japanese government to adopt English as Japan's official, standardized language. Mori argued

that it would be an ‘absolute necessity’ to master the English language due to the fact that the ‘English-speaking’ race dominated the world back then, and I would argue, even now. Mori referred to Japanese as a ‘meager language’ which would not be able to be used outside of the country of Japan (Griole, 2002). Although Mori’s argument could be understood and even confirmed in the present-day, back then it was too extremist and too outlandish to gain enough support for Japanese government officials to attempt to switch the official language of Japan from Japanese to English.

Although it may be true that had Japanese government officials chosen to abolish Japanese as the national language and instead adopt English as the national language, that perhaps Japan would be able to rise to the same level of power and world status as the United States stands today, there is also the difficult and problematic question of race that must be taken into consideration.

Even if the Japanese were to have become literate and fully fluent in English from the Meiji era onwards up until the present day, would they receive the same amount of recognition that English speakers of Anglo-Saxon background have received so far? It seems unlikely, as, in the grand scheme of everything, ethnicity and cultural background have always played a significant role. In this paper, I attempt to ultimately put forth the argument that in lieu of encouraging, to the point of mandating, linguistic homogeneity to level out an international playing field, encouraging linguistic diversity may be the key.

The Relationship between Japan, the United States, and English Education

As it stands today, the United States is the strongest superpower in the world. Though China and Japan may also be in the top ten most powerful countries, they are quite far behind the United States if considering their GDP and economies (Worldpopulationreview.com, 2019). It is a brutal necessity to look into the relationship between ethnicity and power, because the truth may compel the revisiting of past histories that most people, especially country governments, would prefer to keep hidden.

As a matter of fact, it seems as though the only people who wish to declare that racism is no longer relevant are those who are not directly affected by racism. In other words, those in the minorities who continue to be systematically oppressed in this day and age, are silenced by the majority holding power. Historically, ever since the United States declared its independence from Great Britain in 1776, the United States has only been on an uphill incline in terms of increasing global power. Partially, it can be attributed to the fact that English is the most spoken language in the world and has been for a very long time. This fact alone makes it difficult for any non-English speaking country to even attempt to compete with the United States. According to McCrum (2010), “language [is] a vessel for thought and behavior...English is like a virus that has spread around the world, carrying with it a way of looking at, and expressing, new experiences.” The virulence and widespread use of English is what makes the language powerful. The power of the United States and the power of the English language go hand in hand, and the relationship between the two is, without a doubt, positively correlated.

Another problem that plagues the Japanese-speaking population relating to English education is that there is an opposition or sometimes, even backlash against non-native speakers of English. Non-native speakers of English, no matter how fluent they may be, may face barriers

in being able to stand on the same pedestal level as native speakers. In this case ‘whiteness’ appears to almost be a necessity for English speakers (Matsuo, 2005). The standardization of the English language, with regards to the superiority complex of native English speakers, goes beyond “linguistic categories of native/non-native speakers and intersects with [power] in our society, constructing social practices and people’s consciousness (Sato & Doerr, 2014).

It is difficult for a person of any background to operate and be judged in the same way that a white speaker of English would. This is precisely the reason why racism is ever so prevalent in society to this day. Though the world is becoming increasingly international and English is already normalized, it is mostly in the most developed countries in the world that English has become a commonality between people regardless of their racial and ethnic backgrounds. There is an expectation in the world that everyone must be able to communicate comfortably and efficiently in English. Without English as a skill, it is difficult to gain any recognition globally. That being said, English is not a necessity for someone who wishes to remain in their home country, like in Japan, where English is not commonly spoken on a daily basis between those native to the country. That would be the case on a smaller scale though, however. In the grand scheme, English is a mandated necessity for someone who wishes to break into the global world and venture out farther than just within their home country.

Now, it is not to say that Japanese citizens have not attempted to learn English nor that the Japanese population lack ways to receive a proper English education. That is with a doubt, a falsity. Concerning the educational structure of English education in Japan, every person is required to go through *gimu kyōiku* or compulsory education. Japanese citizens are required to spend at least nine years in school, that is, six years in elementary school, and three years in middle school (Sato, 2008). It is common to see students apply to private schools after middle

school if their financial situation allows them to do so. The mandatory curriculum includes Japanese classes, Japanese History classes, Mathematics classes, English classes, and more. Even though English education is a crucial part of compulsory education in Japan, even now it appears difficult for the average Japanese person to maintain a conversation in English, even after spending a fair number of years studying the language.

Japan and the English Language

According to the EF English Proficiency Index published in 2019, Japan ranked 53rd out of 100 countries with regards to English skill level and proficiency. Japan is considered to be ranked in the ‘low’ category for English proficiency. Linguistically, it is certainly difficult for native speakers of Asian languages to adjust to learning English, which is a very different language grammatically, phonetically, and for the most part, different in all aspects. However, when looking at the global ranking of countries and regions, in the ‘moderate’ ranking, there stand several countries in Asia, including neighbors to Japan, China, and South Korea. Though various members of the Japanese government have previously attempted to argue for the importance of English education, it seems that it is not as much interest to the general public, and not considered crucial for success in life.

Despite the strict requirements of mandatory English education in Japan, Japan appears to continuously decline in rankings of global English proficiency. As to why this may be the case, several theories will be outlined shortly. According to the EF English Proficiency Index, since 2018, Japan’s global ranking fell from the category of “moderate” English proficiency to “low” English proficiency. It is quite puzzling as to how a country that enforces mandatory English education so strongly, could rank so low in the world. To combat this, starting in April of 2020,

Japan has implemented a policy to begin incorporating English language activities into primary school education. For students in years 3 and 4, students are now required to go through 35 hours of ‘Foreign Language Activities,’ or *gaikokugo katsudou*. For students in years 5 and 6, 70 hours of Foreign Language Activities are now required. This translates into approximately one hour a week of English instruction for students in years 3 and 4, and roughly two hours a week of English instruction for students in years 5 and 6 (JALT). It appears that Japan is attempting to base this institutional change on the educational models that other Asian countries, such as China and South Korea, have adopted. In both China and South Korea, English education is obligatory for students starting in year 3 of their elementary education.

One reason that has been suggested as to why the Japanese may not harbor as much interest in learning English as opposed to people from other countries is attributed to the entrance examination system in Japan. English is an intensive subject that is tested in entrance exams to high schools and colleges in Japan. With the common Japanese mindset (and mindset held by those in many other countries, if not all) that to do well in life one must receive a good educational experience, which translates usually to receiving a diploma from a college. After receiving a substantial education, one is more likely to be able to successfully land a financially sustainable job. Therefore, entrance examinations have become very crucial for Japanese students, and the *akujunkan*, the ‘vicious cycle’, of difficult and exhausting educational experience has become a harsh reality.

As a result of the harshness of the pressure to do well in their studies, Japanese students work extremely diligently to pass and ideally, excel in their studies and examinations. The effect is that Japanese students learn ways to pass these examinations by studying English learning strategies and test-taking strategies for the sake of receiving stellar grades, and not for the goal of

English proficiency. English learning becomes about the end goal and not the process. That is the reason why many Japanese students are able to recite various grammar points but yet not hold a substantial daily conversation about simple matters. “Mere studying” in this case, cannot necessarily be correlated with the active process of “learning” (Kamada, 1987).

The harsh *akujunkan* for university examinations serves as the primary motivation for students to study English diligently. Thus, once said examinations are finished, there is little intrinsic desire to continue studying English for the average Japanese student. There is a visible decline in interest in English language learning when Japanese students enter universities, having undergone and completed the necessary English examinations (Berwick, R. & Ross, S., 1989).

On a similar note, another theorized reason for the lack of interest in English is that the outcome of earnestly studying English does not translate well into viable careers and job opportunities. For the average Japanese person, English does not play a large role in daily life. Work-related correspondences are, for the most part, communicated in Japanese. Though Japan is a very foreigner-friendly country, in that there are English signs and directories almost everywhere a tourist destination exists, besides those working in the tourist industry, as well as a few other professional industries, Japanese people rarely feel the necessity to communicate in English (Yano, 2001).

As a result of the lack of desire to learn and command English to fluency felt by the average Japanese person, English education and mastery does not become an important pursuit for many. Thus, Japan remains, as one would argue, ‘inferior’ to the dominant, English-speaking United States. That is not to say that Japan is light years away from the United States in terms of global power; Japan is doing quite well in terms of economic prosperity and political stability.

However, there is a reason why Japanese politics are not of interest to those outside of Japan (or one could argue, even in Japan). And that reason is that Japanese politicians do not engage in international conversations on the topic of important global decisions such as climate and change and fossil fuel usage. It is not because Japan is unable to contribute to those conversations, but it is almost as if Japan is a country that does not give itself the platform to even join those conversations. It seems as though Japan chooses not to engage in international decision-making. Part of the reason why this is could be traced back to the lack of connection to the rest of the international world due to the fact that English is not so well mastered in Japan.

According to Rakuten Research, in a 2016 survey with results from 1000 men and women aged 20 to 69 in Japan, about 70% of people self-reported that they feel they are “poor at English.” In another survey by Oricon Japan, among the 1000 people surveyed, 31.5% of people considered themselves as being unable to communicate in English, whereas 53.7% considered themselves to be at the elementary level. The remaining 13.1% considered their command of English to be at the intermediate level. It is interesting though, because despite the results of these two surveys amongst many other similar surveys, Japan does not appear to be concerned about the stagnation of English mastery and proficiency in the country.

English as a part of Racial Hierarchy in the United States

On the topic of the strength of English language proficiency, the English language is the glue that ties together the United States and the power the United States holds. With the English language, comes a hierarchy ranging from those who cannot speak English, to those who can speak English fluently. Naturally, people who can converse and communicate in English fluently would have superiority over the others (Extra et al., 2009). In the case of the United States,

because those who already know English end up being white, and those who need to learn English are the immigrants who are more often than not, not white.

Thus, the English-speaking hierarchy, in turn, becomes a racial hierarchy that the United States attempts to label as ‘diversity.’ Diversity is the largest opposing force to international law, as the very idea of diversity threatens the euro-centric model or colonial model (Sakai, 2019). The contrary to diversity is not homogeneity, but instead, racial hierarchy.

Although many, if not most, would argue that racism is not the pillar and strong foundation of the international world, political theorist Carl Schmitt’s argument holds true in that if the United States did not hold any superiority with regard to the language that is used by the majority in the country, and also in the world, it would be more possible for non-English speaking countries to rise to the occasion and opportunity, and perhaps reach the same level of development and economic prosperity as the United States has. The United States flourishes because there continues to exist the concept of superiority of being white, and in being able to speak and communicate in fluent English. Schmitt’s validity and credibility as a political theorist is highly controversial, but it is interesting to look at the international structure of the world through his point of view considering that racism is still predominant presently.

It is quite ironic that the United States prides itself in its diverse population of cultures and ethnic and racial backgrounds, while simultaneously expecting everyone to gain fluency in English and eventually give up their native language. There exists the expectation from those who are not native to the United States to adopt the English language as their own language (Nat’l Academy of Sciences, 2015), shedding away their existing identity in order to mold themselves into an ‘American.’ The attitudes towards immigrants are ever so turbulent today,

putting pressure on immigrants to assimilate as best as they can into the American culture by first and foremost, adopting the English language.

Yet, English education is by no means fully accessible to all. English education is a privilege, and while simultaneously the United States expects immigrants living in the United States to master English, there are also educational and financial barriers (Nat'l Academy of Sciences, 2015) that exist to prevent these very immigrants from climbing up the social ladder in the United States.

English as a Global Language

Though in Japan, the situation does not parallel the situation experienced by immigrants in the United States, the same idea that English is essential to be able to compete in the global sense exists, whether that be in terms of educational opportunities, work opportunities, and more. This refers to, in particular, global career opportunities that extend outside of Japan. English knowledge is not necessary for a successful career and life in Japan. Mastering English fluency may possibly be the last obstacle that Japan faces in reaching a level where Japan can strongly compete with the United States on an even playing field, internationally. However, a version of Japan where English literacy is not only high but representative of the majority is far from reality as it stands now, especially since those who seek English mastery most likely do not end up staying in Japan. This also probes the question of whether encouraging linguistic homogeneity is ideal; is the loss of linguistic diversity a fair trade-off for a rise in global power?

To reiterate, Japan is by no means inferior to the United States. But, to the United States, Japan may be perceived as inferior simply because of the language barrier and difference in English skill level. That is not to say that Japan cannot continue to flourish or gain more status in

power and wealth without national English literacy. It is simply that even if Japan reaches greater heights as is, that there will be no recognition by the United States, and thus not much global recognition in that regard. Though this may be mere speculation, it is based on the interpretation that the United States continues to uphold a racial hierarchy and a political structure rooted in racism.

Although the United States cannot and would not openly and outwardly admit that in this contemporary era racism is still prevalent today, the fact of the matter is that indeed, it does exist, and is just as important of a problem as it was in the past. Racism is very much alive and dictating differences in daily life by those affected by racism (the victims) and those not affected by racism (the oppressors). And, for the United States to turn a blind eye to the current racism is equivalent to encouraging such racism and to use it even to the United States' benefit. So, utilizing the English language as a reason or an excuse to justify the power of the United States and how the country holds superiority over other countries has proven to be a working tactic for the United States. Looking into the future, it appears that there is no way forward in the international sense for Japan besides adhering and acquiescing to the United States' urge to pursue fluency in the English language.

“A language achieves a genuinely global status when it develops a special role that is recognized in every country” (Crystal, 1997). By this definition, English is the only language that has reached such heights. The rapid development of TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) in itself is representative of this. Additionally, in looking into TESOL, the very fact that in the acronym, every other language is referred to as ‘the other,’ is already indicative of the hierarchical structure of languages on an international scale.

Conclusion

Despite the seemingly unlikely chance for Japan to reach a level of high English proficiency and mastery, it is difficult to refute the idea that English appears to almost be a necessity for a country to reach a high level of global status and power. However, the fact that a loss of linguistic diversity, and as a result loss of cultural diversity as well, may be required in order to gain international status, does not appear to be the most ideal situation nor solution.

In the case of Japan, it is possible that the answer lies within encouraging global instruction in the Japanese language instead. With the escalation and surge of interest in learning the Japanese language due to a strikingly high and constantly rising popularity in Japanese media culture, specifically by a large number of people in the United States, it is possible somewhere down the line the Japanese language may become just as commonly spoken in the United States as English. If that were to become reality, the United States and other English-speaking countries would certainly find difficulty continuing to push for English fluency on a global level.

I propose that in order for more countries to be able to join countries who hold immense power internationally, such as the United States, global encouragement of foreign language instruction should take place, either in addition to or in replacement of solely pushing for increased English instruction and proficiency. I firmly believe that the answer to strengthening countries and their global power to the point where they can compete with power withholding countries such as the United States lies within encouraging more linguistic diversity and diversity in general; in other words, striving for a world where diversity is celebrated instead of in a sense, prevented. The fact that English almost serves as a necessity to success internationally, may be in itself, the greatest issue.

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