

The Linguistic Barrier Issues in Japan and the World

日本と世界における言語障壁問題について

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#### Abstract:

Today, the world is shrinking to a small "size", where various peoples and countries mingle with each other. Even, once an "isolated" country of Japan has unseverable ties with the rest of the world in many ways. And yet, there is a great barrier which prevents the peoples communicate with and understand each other, thus preventing any smooth and efficient execution of various tasks: the language barrier. The paper first takes up the case of Japan and examines the problems of English education in Japan and evaluates whether Japan can adopt English as an auxiliary language. Then, the paper deals with the linguistic barrier issue on the universal level, discussing what language can be an international language and how it can be chosen.

#### 概要

「小さくなりつつある世界」に住み、かつ世界経済を動かすほどに影響力を増した日本は、かつては孤立した国でありえたが、今や他国との関係を断つことができなくなつた。しかし、同時に、他国とのコミュニケーションがうまく行かず、業務遂行にも支障をきたしている。本考察では、その原因である言語障壁について考える。最初に、英語を初めとする外国語教育における問題点を分析・指摘し、次に、英語を日本の補助言語として採用する可能について論じる。さらに、世界の業務全体に支障をきたしている原因である世界的な言語問題を取り扱うため、世界言語・国際補助語にふさわしい条件やその採用を阻める問題点について論じる。

#### 1. Problem

Today, Japan stands as a major economic power of the world; its decisions and actions would affect the whole world. Because of the defeat and great mistake she has made during the World War II, she is shrinking away from the international scene, especially that of politics. She does not wish to meddle with the affairs of the world. And yet, her major

involvement in the economic affairs makes it impossible for her to remain "a frog in the well" which does not know anything about the vast oceans. The whole world is demanding Japan to stand up and meet its expectations: be they free trade policies, contribution to the developing countries issues, involvement in the environmental protection, speaking against terrorism and persecution in the Middle East. Yet she remains silent.

The reasons for her silence do not seem to be confined to her unwillingness to get involved in the international affairs after the W W II. Rather there is a major factor which is preventing her from speaking up, namely, the linguistic barrier—her inability to communicate with the rest of the world seems to be the largest obstacle which engulfs her and other countries. When one says the linguistic barrier for Japan, we usually mean the lack of the English proficiency. Because English is spoken in many countries with which Japan does trade, and Japan herself makes English as the major part of mandatory foreign language pedagogy. Therefore, it is an overriding issue for Japan

to adopt English as an auxiliary language and reform education accordingly.

And yet, even if Japan may overcome its linguistic barrier, there are still many other linguistic barriers which separate the whole world. Thus, it is also necessary to discuss the issue of universal linguistic unity.

The case of Japanese linguistic barrier can be applied on the universal level, while the universal issue can be reversely applied to the Japanese case.

For these reasons, we will take up three subjects in this paper: 1) The problems in the English education in Japan, 2) Possibility of adopting English as an auxiliary language in Japan, 3) The World Language Issue.

## 2. The English Education in Japan

The defects of the English education in Japan have been frequently pointed out in various places. Here, we shall summarize the main problems below with some explanation. In doing this, the author referred to an excellent discussion of the matter by Saiki (1992, chapter 3; also see Sonda: "A Case Study of English Education at a Two-Year College", 1993).

- 1) Lack of proper pronunciation exercise:
- 2) Dependence on visual information:
- 3) Dependence on translation:
- 4) English sentences are thought to be replacement of Japanese words with English:
- 5) Conversation is thought to be acquiring only idioms and expressions:
- 6) English study is thought to be a rote-memory exercise:
- 7) "If one thinks about grammar, one cannot speak English":
- 8) "Until one has studies grammar, one cannot begin conversational practice":
- 9) A dictionary is to be consulted with as much as possible:
- 10) Lessons should be proceeded with as much material and as quickly as possible:

11) Grammar, conversation, reading and composition should be taught by different teachers:

12) "If one wishes to improve one's English, one should improve one's Japanese":

13) English ability is a form of superhuman act:

14) English education should begin after 12, when one's Japanese is basically acquired and one's mind is firmly grounded in basic knowledge of life:

15) The key to English study success is in the "head" (=mental ability):

One of the major problems in technique is that the Japanese method is overlooking the fundamental approach to foreign language learning, namely, oral comprehension. Oral comprehension is the basis of all language learning, of which listening comprehension is the beginning of all; by listening, speech becomes possible.

The traditional approach to Japanese language education, which is training on how to read and write Kanji, has been introduced to the English education, too.

Also, the high school and college entrance exam system makes it very difficult to provide oral comprehension training, due to a large number of students preparing for and taking exams. Classroom instruction in a large class is easily done when a teacher gives a lecture on how to take written exams.

Another major issue is that English education is started too late in Japan: The age 12 is when one's mind starts to solidify and abstract thinking begins--the very reason Japanese educators regard as good reasons for starting language education are the reasons why linguists oppose. Research has shown that early foreign language education (as early as 2 or 3 year old) does not confuse infants' mind, rather it enhances his learning, stimulates his intellect and broadens his mind.

Finally, probably the most fundamental problem is the psychological barrier which exists in the Japanese heart and mind. It is

### 3. English as an Auxiliary Language for Japan

often thought that an ability to speak a foreign language is a superhuman act, an art which ordinary Japanese are impossible to achieve. This is mainly due to the linguistic isolation of the Japanese language (and the geographical isolation as well). Somehow such an ability is thought to be "non-normal" or even "abnormal". But this is purely based on deviation from the "norm" up to the 19th-20th century in Japan. Science and research have shown that Japanese can acquire English, when they are sent abroad for study or work or when they really concentrate on learning it through an appropriate method (the above-mentioned). However, social psychology of Japan is still such that it is not easy to listen to and speak English with comfort and enthusiasm. It is dissociated from the daily life of Japanese. Thus it has become a mere academic subject, an isolated, mental island confined to only those who care or afford to spend time, money and energy on acquiring it. Also, since it is dissociated from the daily life and the domain of majority of people's attention, its education has lost the most important element: the affective aspect. In other words, its learning process lacks in the feeling, the intuition and the heart. Unless it appeals to the heart, English cannot be truly acquired. It will remain an academic subject. The openness of the heart, therefore, is the key. This actually involves the whole issue of internationalization of the Japanese. Internationalization is not a mere adoption of foreign words, clothes or food. It is an internal act to take interest in foreign affairs and show eagerness and take action in solving problems of the world, or stated briefly, to participate in building a World Community based on the principle of Unity in Diversity (see Reischauer: *Nihon no Kokusaika*, and Sonda: "The Redefinition of Internationalization: Japan's Case"). Its process is an internal, psychological revolution. The fundamental reform of English education must be based on this concept.

The theoretical aspects of English learning have been discussed above. However, what about the reality? What about its practicality?

The major barrier remains to be the psychological barrier. Until and unless this barrier is removed, no matter how meticulous the method and technique, to no avail.

Thus, its removal becomes imperative. Then, how can we go about removing it?

First of all, we must have a vision, a vision about our linguistic future. For it is our thought that determines our action. The basis of our thought is our philosophy, a system of thought. And the foundation of the system is a broad vision.

So, where are we going from here in terms of language? Are we going to use the Japanese for eternity? Do we want to shut ourselves out from the outside? Apparently, the desire to communicate with the outside world is very strong and it is inescapable—Japan cannot live without working with the rest of the world economically.

Thus, it is undeniable that Japan wishes to communicate with foreign countries. Then, through what language? Japanese or otherwise? The linguistic isolation and its relative difficulty to acquire for non-Japanese rules out the choice of Japanese language as a common mode of international communication. Japan herself will probably agree with this. And the Japanese government has already chosen English as the major foreign language to be taught during mandatory education. This is naturally because of the virtual status of English as a working world language today (see Crystal, pp. 512-516). And a great number of English schools throughout Japan attests to the fact that Japanese eagerness to acquire English as a means of international communication.

Knowledge of English was once rare, yet these days basic conversational skill of

English is taken for granted and required for many of jobs including secretary and clerks in an international setting in Japan.

The next question is then, how do we want to view English in relation to Japanese? Will English replace Japanese in the end? Or English remains to be a temporary tool to communicate with foreign peoples? Considering the strength of the literary and oral tradition and culture of the Japanese, it is not likely to extinguish or be replaced by another language so easily like other native languages with no written history did (e. g., Hawaiian).

Thus, it is evident that Japanese will continue to be used inside Japan while English will act as an auxiliary language to communicate with the rest of the world. And yet, it seems that the fact the English is by no means an official international language designated as such by any world organization, makes it somewhat awkward to implement English as an official auxiliary language of Japan.

Based on the above vision, we will have to implement adoption of English as an auxiliary language for Japan.

The first thing to do is English educational reform based on the concepts introduced in the section II.

1) Ethical and psychological education to open up one's mind and heart to the world: The education on the concept of world citizenship. We must first educate children as to our role in the world as Japanese, that Japan's existence is possible because of the existence of the world, that therefore we must build a World Community as well as contribute to Japan herself, and that that is the meaning of world citizenship. The acquisition of English is important in this regard because it makes it possible for us to communicate with many of the peoples in the world today.

2) Early beginning of English education: As discussed before, we must begin to offer formal English education as early as in pre-

school. In this way, children will acquire English as natural part of their entire language development, English will become part of their life. In this regard, we must also encourage parents to promote English education inside family life, because without familial support, such education cannot complete and the home is the basis of education—they can even begin before children are sent off to pre-school!

3) If we begin to offer formal English education in pre-school, we must reorganize primary and secondary education curricula of English as well. We can possibly aim to complete basic English education through pre-school and primary education. After secondary education, the level can be much higher, including more abstract learning material.

4) Reform in English education must necessarily involve the reform of entire education system. First, education based on fact learning on a large-scale classroom setting, must be reformed. Education is offered to build a character and to carry forward a civilization. Fact learning and mental training are very important elements, but these must be based on the concept of service to society (and the world). Children need to know what they are going to be working for in the future. So opportunity to get to do some work for community and/or foreign countries, should be given while they are in school, so that they will be able to relate academic work to their future life. By the time children finish primary education, most of them acquire basic linguistic and mathematical skills. Junior high school education onwards, becomes a place to compete against each other for getting into a good college. So, secondary education is one major place to reform.

5) Reform in secondary education then involves reform of entrance exam system. Laxity in entrance requirements might result in lowering of academic quality of high schoolers, as lamented by American educators. However, Japanese education needs to

lean more towards a kind of system adopted by the American counterpart, which has an open admission system and education is based on pragmatic values. The key is to seek a middle path between Japanese and American systems. Neither strict, rigid approach and discipline nor extreme freedom and liberty should be avoided.

6) While executing the above reforms, we can work on reforming methodical aspects of English education. This is basically changing the focus from textbook learning to auditory-oral based learning. When we have taught the purpose of English learning and reformed the educational system, adoption of this method becomes much easier. Children will have freedom to learn practical English, unfettered by closed-minded social psychology, neurotic worry about written entrance exams. When there are places to use English, children will even devise their own ways to acquire new skills.

When consciousness of society about world citizenship cultivated, internal eyes will be opened to the true purpose of English education, the educational system reformed and a proper method utilized, English education should be able to yield magnificent results: Japanese wonderous participation in building a World Community. The process itself, of course, could be the most difficult part of the whole task.

Having discussed the possibility of English as an auxiliary language for Japan, let us now deal with the subject of an international auxiliary language for the whole world.

#### 4. World Language:

The author has theoretically adopted English as an auxiliary language for Japan in a rather quick, simple manner in the above. Choosing one for the whole world, however, is not so easy. For it involves no less than 160 independent nations and some territories, speaking about 20 language families and groups, including well over 3000

languages and dialects. The United Nations alone adopts 6 languages as official tongues. The difficulty of choosing an official world language does not only involve the number of languages to choose from, but also the political, economic, linguistic, and emotional aspects.

Nevertheless, there have been candidates for a world language and attempts to create one as such in the past. The possibility of adopting an international language is twofold: choosing from among the existing languages or inventing a new one.

Let us first deal with candidates from the existing.

During the Medieval Age, Latin was a common language for educational purposes in Western Europe; French was an international language of diplomacy during the 19th century; Spanish was once thought to become something of a world language because of its increasing number of users (in Latin and South Americas); By the sheer number of native speakers, Chinese outranks all others with 1 billion; Russian is spoken by 150 million people who occupy once one of the world's largest nation, the old Soviet Union; Hindi is spoken by 200 million people in the Indian Sub-Continent; Arabic is the language of Koran (the Sacred Scripture of the Islamic Faith whose followers number as the largest religious population in the world only next to Christianity) and the Arabs (who inhabit major portion of the Middle East and North Africa); Japanese is spoken by 120 million people whose economic activity influence the entire world economy today -- despite all these candidates, no language today surpasses the status of the English language. Why? The reasons can probably be summarized in the political, economic, military and religious influences of the English-speaking countries combined.

However, no matter how influential English might be today, it is still a relative strength; its native speakers are still only 350 million, its users as an official tongue 1.4 billion, and

there are countries where people have movements against use of English such as France, French-speaking Canada, Spain, Germany, Mexico, Mianma, India, etc (see Crystal, p. 514). Why? The very reasons English is influential today: political, economic, military and religious reasons.

This is why some people have attempted to create a language that dose not belong to any particular country, political partisan or religious movement. Such a language is called an invented or artificial language.

Historically, we have had the following as such: Volapuk (1880), Esperanto (1887), Idiom Neutral (1902), Latino Sine Flexione (1903), Ido (1907), Occidental (1928), Interglossa (1943), Interlingua (1951), and Glose (1981).

Of these, Esperanto has been the most influential and successful; and yet, it has never been recognized universally as an official international language.

But who will designate any language as an international language? Naturally the first and only institution we can think of today is the United Nations. In fact, in 1966, approximately one million signatures from 74 nations were submitted to it, asking to designate it as an international language (Crystal, p. 509).

But this proposal was rejected because there were oppositions from supporters of English and other invented languages.

Thus, no language has achieved a status of an official world language. Although the authority and power of the United Nations itself may be in question in this regard, it is beyond the scope of the paper to discuss who should designate a world language or how the United Nations should be given more power. Rather, let us focus our attention on what are the ideal characteristics of an invented language and what are its limitations.

Crystal gives the following as the factors which make an ideal invented language (p. 508):

1) Ease of learning: Grammar must be regular, spelling and pronunciation must correspond, there should be few difficult sounds.

2) Ease of relating to various native language: The structure should be flexible enough to ease translatability to and from other language; this should contain characteristics universal to all languages. Languages internationally and historically used often would be given strong consideration in this regard.

3) Wide range of application: It has to meet the daily needs as well as specialized fields such as science, religion, commerce, sports and politics, as well as international modes of communication such as telegraphs, television, radio broadcast, etc.

4) Standardization: In order to facilitate mutual understanding, there should not be any dialectical alteration. Suggestions to new forms should be supervised by an authoritative agency.

5) Neutrality: It must be neutral politically and linguistically, and must be equally acceptable to all nations.

6) Giving insight to human thought: Supporters of artificial language believe that the more regular and specific the language is, the more logical and rational the user can think and speak, which leads to a better grasp of reality of things.

Then, what prevents an emergence and adoption of an invented language? Again, Crystal (p. 509) gives the following factors:

1) Motivation: This is the question that how the inventor, who is the only person in the world who knows that language, can persuade the rest of the world to study and acquire it? Zamenhof himself worked on this problem by adding a pledge note at the end of his introductory book on Esperanto saying that when 10 million persons officially promise to study the international language invented by Dr. Esperanto, "I [i. e., reader] too shall promise to study it." This project was not carried to the end.

2) Uniqueness: Language is a reflection of ethnicity and cultural identity; this reflection is one of the major functions of language. Artificial language lacks in this.

## The Linguistic Barrier Issues in Japan and the World

3) Linguistic polarization: Most of the artificial languages are based on Indo-European languages, therefore, non-Indo-European language speakers have clear disadvantages. Artificial language shows linguistic closedness. Some say that this is an indication of underestimation of linguistic diversity.

4) Semantic difference: Since each language has special vocabulary; translation into artificial language does not fully reflect the original nuance. This is an indication of impossibility of having a universal language.

5) Opposition: The very enthusiasm of the supporters of artificial language has incited opposition. Some have been regarded as doing political activity. During the 1930's, in Germany and USSR, some of the movements have been put under pressure, and some members were arrested and/or even shot to death.

Let us now examine each of the above factors:

1) Ease of learning: In addition to this, the author suggests that there should be as few synonyms as possible.

2) Ease of relating to native language: It is impossible to contain all the characteristics of languages equally, because some languages like Japanese are not related to any major language of the world. Some languages will have to face and accept some disadvantages.

3) Applicability to wide range of fields: Invented language will have a challenge of dealing with language mainly in the area of humanities, such as religion, philosophy, and literature, because these deal with the heart, feeling, faith, and emotion of human life.

4) Standardization: It is a very important point; however, appointing such an authoritative center itself involves a far-reaching administrative measure. Thus, it is not merely a linguistic issue; it is an administrative issue as well.

5) Neutrality: Absolute equality in a linguistic and political term may not be possible. Some nations and peoples may have to

accept some disadvantages at first; however, if the whole world supports and cooperates in this worldwide enterprise (to teach a world language), such disadvantages will be overcome soon. This is, in a sense, an ethical issue. If an international language is officially designated, the world must try to study it out of respect. If there is no unity, it is either because the language is deficient or the world lacks in maturity to carry out a worldwide project at that point.

6) Insight into human thought: This in itself is a wonderful aspect of invented language. Language is a living thing but so far no language has been invented which influenced human thought; it has always been a "known" language. Humanity has reached such a point where science now challenges to create a more logical, articulate, rational language than ever. However, this is an indication that this process must necessarily involve the other mighty force of life: religion. Religion has played an important role of shaping and influencing the foundations of philosophy, which was the foundation of all sciences. Religion deals with the invisible, intuitive, emotive aspects of human reality.

Language itself has been greatly influenced by religious thought and religious scriptures. In order to create a language which gives deep insight into human thought, inventors might have to take into consideration religious factors. Of course, this is a very delicate and complex matter. Any affiliation with a religious movement or any favoritism with one particular religion could undermine the whole process of creating a "neutral" language. Here is yet another major issue to explore.

As for the preventing factors:

1) Motivation: It will take time to spread the information and take many more experts working together on the project to present a powerful, persuasive, artificial language to the world. This is not a task by any one individual or even few individuals.

2) It is not impossible to create such a

feeling from an artificial language, if a great many people support and learn it with enthusiasm. A language is a living thing; it changes and grows as the human world itself changes and grows. If users use it with a concept of world citizenship, it will certainly develop its own identity, which is that of world citizenship and world community. This implies that there may be changes in the language as it develops, which issue has to do with the issue of supervising changes and alterations. The concept of a world language itself is a reflection of the idea of world citizenship. Inordinate attachment to one's ethnic identity, which is often described as nationalism, has been one of the causes of wars, hate, conflicts. Patriotism in a healthy sense should be upheld; however, needs of the age are such that it is high time to put the interests of the whole before those of individual nations (see Reischauer). Such international education may have to take place at the same time as world language education takes place.

3) Linguistic polarization: The author wonders if it is possible at all to have an absolutely equal reflection of all languages. As discussed earlier, some peoples will have to accept some disadvantages. If the whole world supports and extends its help to those in a disadvantageous position, the pace of learning will be speeded up. Here again, we see the importance of ethical mind.

4) Semantic difference: We must keep in mind the very purpose of adopting a world language. It is to aid in building a World Community. If we adopt a concept that a World Community is a higher stage of human evolution on this planet, then, a world language itself is an evolution. If vocabulary change is to take place, naturally, we must accept it as natural part of evolution. If we combine this concept with a notion of Unity in Diversity, that is, to respect various cultural elements, then, the answer lies in the middle path: Take a moderate pace in changing vocabulary or adopting new one. For, if each language has its own treasure of

wisdom and knowledge, then, we must take time to absorb them, exchange and discuss, so that in the long run, we will combine and mix them into an even greater Treasure of universal wisdom and knowledge.

5) Opposition: Religion, ideology, environmental group, linguistic movement-- social groups and movements are inspired by their belief and understanding in something and act accordingly. And many of them are admirable and respectable. However, no matter how the original intention might be good, often the later supporters and followers have tended to digress from the original or distort it or they were succumbed to their passion or overzeal. Society must react to such overzeal or fanaticism accordingly. Zamenhoff himself advocated a world religion which advocates peace, tolerance and unification of peoples of the world (Crystal, p. 508). However, his movement later suffered schism because many members placed more importance on practicality of Esperanto rather than its religious value.

In order to lessen opposition, we must involve the whole world, through scholars, representatives, ministers and even rulers in this project-- from the process of inventing a language to perfecting it and announcing it to the whole world (through the United Nations?). This way, we can prevent giving an impression that any one particular group is ruling the project.

Again, this is a very delicate matter, without having a common set of values, it is impossible to carry out a universal project like this one. To have such a set of values implies to belong to a particular group, religious, philosophical or ideological. Or should we create one through assiduous research, experimentation, consultation and implementation?

Thus, the world language issue is no small project confined to only a handful of scholars. It is a worldwide enterprise involving the political, economic, scientific, technological and religious aspects of the human world. To embrace such a wide range of human

activity, we will need a gigantic system, a system which has a clear set of values, has administrative principles to work with, and has a machinery itself to carry out tasks.

To find out what it is or to create such a system is a task the world must undertake— that in itself is possibly the greatest worldwide enterprise.

## 5. Conclusion:

It has been pointed out that the current English education in Japan has many defects to overcome. Such a reform must be based on the concept of world citizenship, the true purpose of English study, reform of the entire educational system in Japan and the adoption of a proper learning method (using auditory-oral centered learning).

Through adoption of English as an auxiliary language for Japan, she will be greatly reinforced in strength, manpower and flexibility to serve in building an emerging World Community based on the concept of Unity in Diversity.

Though Japan may be helped in joining the World Community by adopting English as an auxiliary language, the whole world has not reached a point where it will adopt one as such. There are political, economic, military, emotional and religious factors which complicate the whole issue. Though English has attained a relatively dominant status, there are still many people who are not using it officially or opposing its use. In order to solve the problem, the idea of inventing a language has been carried out by several scholars. This, however, has not satisfied everyone yet. The issue of linguistic unity is a far-reaching enterprise. It involves manifold factors, as it does the whole world. Most of all, it must take a long time to perfect such a language and persuade all the nations of the world. Considering the manifold, complex aspects of choosing/inventing and supervising the life of an international language, in the extreme case, we may even have

to advocate a need for a world-embracing system, which deals with the political, economical, military, and religious aspects of the whole planet's life. One of future researches should treat this aspect.

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