

Contextualizing Current Activities of the National Language Division¹ in Japan

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This paper reports on current activities of *kokugo bunkakai*, i.e., the National Language Division of the Cultural Council, and offers a critical examination of them based on the historical underpinnings of the current language regime as well as changes in linguistic dynamics in Japan. The examination delineates relationships among the ideological background of the current language regime, ongoing shifts in linguistic dynamics within Japan, and government policy-making responses, or the lack thereof, to such changes. There is a need to reconceptualize the role of Japanese from a wider perspective that is grounded in understanding domestic linguistic phenomena in the global context. The present study investigates not only the range of language policies but also how they are formed, reproduced, and changed.

Key Words : language policy, language ideology, Japanese

As one of the most modern countries in the twenty-first century, Japan faces a number of challenges. One and a half centuries after it began its course as a modern nation-state, Japan finds itself again in a conundrum about how to cope with the forces of globalization. In the mid-nineteenth century Japan opened its ports for international trade and exchange, but in the twenty-first century, domestic changes in Japanese society—e.g., the decline in population, as well as globalization-fueled shifts in Japan's economy—are demanding linguistic reconfigurations that contest the bases of Japan's monolingual ideology: the trinity of language, nation, and people (Gottlieb 2012, Heinrich 2012).

This paper reports on current activities of the National Language Division,² which was established in 2001 as a division of the Cultural Councils within the Ministry of Education, Culture, Science, Sports and Technology. The purpose of this paper is to examine the bureaucratic practices and processes by which the government body forms language policies and guidelines. Along with a discussion of the National Language Division's language planning activities is a critical overview of the historical underpinnings of the current language regime as

well as current changes in linguistic dynamics in Japan. This is a preliminary study that contributes to research on language policies in Japan by investigating not only language policies in effect but also how they are formed, reproduced, sustained, and changed. Because the term *kokugo* entails layers of meanings and is richly encoded with ideological implications, I refer to the National Language Division in this paper as the Kokugo Division in order to preserve all the connotations therein. By examining its activities, this paper delineates ongoing shifts in linguistic dynamics in Japan, and government policy-making responses, or the lack thereof, to such changes against the ideological background of the current language regime. My examination suggests there is a need to reconceptualize the role of Japanese from a wider perspective that is grounded in understanding domestic linguistic phenomena in a global context.

1 *Kokugo bunkakai* in Japanese. See the glossary.

2 The National Language Division is a division of the National Cultural Council, i.e., *bunka shingikai*, which deals with matters of cultural policies, such as national treasure and copyright.

1. Kokugo and its history

Japan has long been described as a monolingual nation, and the identity of the nation has stood on the premise that Japan is united and managed through *kokugo*, which translates as ‘nation’s language.’ (Lee 2010[1996], Miller 1982, Heinrich 2012, Yasuda 2006). *Kokugo* is not simply a name for the language spoken and used as a means of communication in Japan. As Lee (2010 [1996]) has shown, it is a complex semiotic sign saturated with ideological implications.³ It has been conceived of as a carrier of tradition that is closely tied to cultural continuity and ethnic identity. In addition, in the history of modern Japan it was constructed as a venerable language suitable for nation-making, disseminated over the whole of Japan even where local varieties of the language were spoken. *Kokugo* was a standardized language that was considered ‘beautiful’ and to ‘reflect the moral values’ of the Japanese people. Ueda Kazutoshi (1867–1937), a European trained linguist, was a highly influential figure who envisioned *kokugo* as key to uniting language, nation, and people, and he described *kokugo* as ‘the spiritual blood’ of the nation. A professor at University of Tokyo, he influenced major linguists and led a group that successfully promoted his conception of the relationship between the nation and language as modern. *Kokugo*, thus, had come to be regarded as manifestation of the spirit of Japan and Japanese people. The ideology posited that being a Japanese speaker made one a member of the Japanese ethnic group among whom the Japanese spirit and common values were shared. Japanese language, identity, and values were intertwined and inseparable from each other. (Lee 2010, Yasuda 2006)

Standardization of Japanese and its dissemination led to leveling of regional language varieties, and minority languages were relegated to the shadows of national culture and subordinated to *kokugo* as a result: for example, various forms of Japanese were labeled ‘dialects,’ which were denounced as inferior to Standard Japanese or *hyoojungo*. The Dialect Eradication Movement targeted ‘dialects’ for elimination to ensure language ‘purity’ throughout Japan. When Japan expanded into other Asian regions, the logic of *kokugo* broke down. Paradoxically, Japanese education or *nihongo kyooiku* had to bear the responsibility for making imperial subjects through teaching them Japanese, which meant instilling in

them ‘the Japanese spirit’ (Yasuda 2000, 2006). In general, *nihongo* refers to Japanese as one of the languages in the world, but even this term was not free from ideologies of Imperial Japan. During the 1940s when the empire included Southeast Asia, simplified Japanese, *kan-i nihongo*, was devised with the intention to spread the language swiftly to the population in the region so that they would be governed through Japanese (Yasuda 2000: 139-168).

Although Japan’s defeat in WWII in 1945 brought radical changes to the nation’s political and ideological orientation, Japanese stayed as the sole language of the nation throughout its modern history. Its status and ubiquity within national borders were presumed to be unquestionable. Although some proposed alternatives—for example, Shiga Naoya suggested the use of French—these ideas were never considered seriously. As a result, government level language planning after WWII was confined to *kokugo*, and the nation’s multilingual reality was invisible to the majority (Gottlieb 2005, Heinrich 2012).

2. Recent Changes in Linguistic Dynamics in Japan

In recent years, however, changes within Japanese society—particularly economic, social, and cultural blurring of borders—have eroded its monolingual ideology. Nearly seventy years after WWII developments in the Japanese society are calling for further changes in labor, population, education, and communication policies. Language is once again emerging as a major issue in the transition. Specifically, immigration, internationalization of communication, and emerging visibility of indigenous minority languages are affecting linguistic awareness in Japan. The phenomena result from new political and economic order of globalization and post-nationalism. They make divisions based on national borders less significant and valid on one level, but on another level nationality and ethnicity are still important for control and marketability.

First, recent increases in immigrants and foreign residents make it clear that Japanese is not the only language used in Japan. In addition to the pressure from English and the advocacy of Japanese-English bilingualism, monolingual ideology is being eroded by changes in domestic multilingual reality as well as recognition of a multilingual reality that was

3 The notion of *kokugo* signifies much more than the Japanese language spoken in Japan: it is an ideological construct as discussed earlier and, for example, in Lee (2010: 2): “It is widely recognized today that *kokugo* implies an invented concept steeped in various ideologies. On the other hand, *nihongo* is considered as referring to a neutral and objective entity recognized as such in the field of linguistics. However, even such an unassuming concept as *nihongo* cannot exist outside of a certain framework of consciousness.”

long-standing but invisible. Since the 1980s, descendants of Japanese immigrants to South American countries, including Brazil and Peru, were brought back to Japan as labor. As of December 2013, the number of registered foreign residents, with about 190 different nationalities, in Japan was 2,066,445.⁴ The largest foreign resident group at present is from China with 648,980 people, followed by Korea, the Philippines, Brazil, Vietnam, and the United States. In 1980, the total number of registered foreign residents in Japan was only 782,910. The total number of registered foreign residents in Japan increased more than two and a half times between 1980 and 2013.⁵

Furthermore, the Japanese themselves are becoming more diverse in languages they speak. The number of Japanese nationals who resided abroad at the end of 2012 reached 1,249,577, which is nearly double the 679,379 who resided abroad in 1992 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2012). Although not all are fluent in the local languages, the cumulative number of people who came back to Japan with multilingual capacity must be more than the current number of Japanese residing abroad. This means that the linking of language, nation, and people is becoming more varied.⁶ It also means, in part, not all Japanese nationals have the same background in Japanese as is evidenced by young returnees struggling to acquire Japanese linguistic skills to keep up with the expectations of the Japanese education system.

Second, communication is increasingly internationalized. Technological advances and the movement of people have forced Japan to compete in the growing global market (Iyotani 2002). The momentum on the global scale that pushes Japan further into the neoliberal world requires Japanese citizens to be open to the world market and at the same time becoming more diverse within the nation. As the need for proficiency in languages other than Japanese grows, Japan has placed a heavy emphasis on English in education and in corporate practices—the number of employers that require employees to speak English is rising. English education, which had previously been introduced in middle schools, is now beginning in elementary schools. The monolingual ideology that equated language, nation, and people is hollowing out, yet a vision of new relationships among those social constructs is still being explored. The global need to communicate internationally has increased demands for a common language of

communication, which presently and by default is English. Corporations have adopted English as the language of communication in all of their offices. Accepting more immigrants is being considered a viable solution to Japan's aging and shrinking population and labor shortages in some sectors. Finally, monolinguality is also being challenged by the government's plan to produce globally competent citizens who can contribute to economic as well as cultural activities beyond Japan's national borders.

The third development that is changing linguistic awareness in Japan is the increased visibility of indigenous minority languages in Japan. The rise in self-awareness of indigenous populations and their visibility in the domestic as well as international political arena are calling attention to Japan's multi-ethnic and multilingual reality. In 2009 UNESCO recognized eight endangered languages in Japan: Ainu, six Ryukyuan languages in Okinawa and Kagoshima, and the language of the Hachijo Island in the Pacific, 287 kilometers south of metropolitan Tokyo.⁷ UNESCO's designation highlights that they are indeed within Japan's border, and with its recognition, the Japanese government is obliged to make efforts to protect the languages.

Beginning in the 1990s, the Ainu became more visible domestically in asserting their rights as a minority group. Advocacy for the other seven languages, however, has not been as successful as that of Ainu, but their recently gained recognition as endangered languages in the international arena certainly invites public attention to the multilingual reality of Japan and adds a certain level of momentum and support for the revitalization movement that has been active in Okinawa. The controversy over familial language identities aside, the political nature of counting of languages in Japan as well as the heterogeneity of the population are now out in the open. The politics of language recognition are no longer masked by essentialist claims of homogeneity that used to prevail both in domestic and international discourses on Japan.

Presently, Japan needs to reconsider its linguistic configuration for the new century of increasingly globalized era. The new perspective that Japan is in fact a multilingual country where a significant number of its residents use multiple languages in everyday interactions could encourage changes in the government's involvement in language matters, including redefinition of the role of Japanese as well

4 <http://www.e-stat.go.jp/SG1/estat/List.do?lid=000001118467> Accessed May 10, 2014.

5 *Toroku gaikokujin tokei no gaiyo*, <http://www.moj.go.jp/content/000005310.pdf> Accessed May 10, 2014.

6 *Statistics on Japanese Nationals Overseas*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs. <http://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/files/000017471.pdf> Accessed May 10, 2014.

7 Amami in Kagoshima; Kunigami, Miyako, Okinawa, Yaeyama, and Yonaguni in Okinawa; Hachijo in Tokyo.

as other languages in Japan. Therefore, it is of critical importance to review how the Japanese government is responding to the demands and linguistic needs of a changing society and how it plans to manage the transition through language.

3. The Kokugo Division

Historically there has been no centralized language academy that specializes in formulating language policies in Japan, and the Kokugo Division is certainly not a government body that dictates language policies. There have been, however, influential councils whose activities had direct and indirect impact on language policies: the National Language Research Council (1902–1913), i.e., *Kokugo Chosa-kai*, the Interim National Language Research Council (1921–1934), i.e., *Rinji Kokugo Chosa-kai*, and the National Language Council (1934–2001), i.e., *Kokugo Shingikai*.⁸ These various councils centered their agendas primarily on Japanese orthographic issues, including kana spelling, kanji restrictions, and the spelling of Romanized Japanese.⁹

Kokugo Shingikai, the National Language Council, was dismantled in 2001 due to the Central Government Reform of 2001, a major reorganization that included ministerial restructuring. The Council had been under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education until 2001, when the Ministry became a part of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Science, Sports, and Technology, or MEXT. The Kokugo Division was established in 2001 to continue the work of the former body, but it now functions as one of the divisions of the Cultural Council. The Cultural Council includes the Copyright Division, the Cultural Heritage Division, and the Persons of Cultural Merit Selection Division, in addition to the Kokugo Division. In other words, the matter of *kokugo* is considered a division of the cultural domain.

Since its inception in 2001 the Kokugo Division has had several subcommittees: Kokugo Issues Organizing Subcommittee (2011–2012); Kokugo Agenda Research Subcommittee (2012–2013); Kokugo Research Subcommittee (September 2011–November 2011); Kanji Subcommittee (2005–2007, 1st term); Honorifics Subcommittee (2005–2007); Kokugo Education Subcommittee (April 2003–July 2003); Reading Activity Subcommittee (April 2003–July 2003). Currently, the Kokugo Division has only two subcommittees, the Kanji Subcommittee and the

Japanese Language Education Subcommittee.

The Kokugo Division holds several meetings per year in which its subcommittees report to the division at large. As of May 2014, it had held 55 meetings since its 2001 establishment. The Kokugo Division in turn reports to the Cultural Council yearly. All of the meetings, including those of the Kokugo Division and its subcommittees, are open to the public: observation opportunities, *boochoo*, are offered and the minutes of the meetings are published on the internet at the website of the Agency for Cultural Affairs (http://www.bunka.go.jp/kokugo_nihongo/bunkasingi/kokugo.html). When interested parties wish to observe the meetings, they are asked to contact the Agency for Cultural Affairs beforehand. Officials then contact observers and provide them with seats in the back of the meeting room. Observers receive a copy of the documents distributed to Division members on that particular day. The documents include reports from the subcommittees, a seat arrangement map that illustrates the attending committee members' names and the locations of their seats. The minutes of meetings are posted on the website of the Agency for Cultural Affairs about two months after each meeting.

4. Reports to the 53rd National Language Division

1) The Kanji Subcommittee

As discussed earlier in this paper kanji has dominated the agenda of the governmental language councils. Although kana syllabaries were developed early on in Japan from the 8th century to 10th century, documents written in kanji and Chinese were regarded for a long time as the 'true' and the sole official form of writing, and their authority was hardly ever questioned. Because of its historical importance kanji represents major social and political constructs, including tradition, civility, authority, knowledge, and power.

In the context of Japanese modernization, kanji attracted attention for a different reason. It was demonized by those who intended to modernize Japan by embracing Westernization and the ideology of efficiency. Exposure to alphabetic writing systems of the West in the mid-nineteenth century encouraged some Japanese writers to question the fundamental assumption that kanji must be used to write

8 Other research committees include the Ad-hoc Kana Spelling Research Committee (*Rinji Kanazukai Chosa-inikai*) and the Ad-hoc Romanization Spelling Research Committee (*Rinji Romaji Chosa-kai*).

9 See Yasuda (2007) for the activities of Kokugo Shingikai, a detailed analysis of the Council's history, and a critical examination of controversies within the Council.

Japanese. Ever since Maejima Hisoka submitted his proposal to the shogun to abolish kanji in 1866, the question of what type of writing system should be used to write Japanese dominated the agenda for language planning activities in Japan. Intellectuals of the time proposed and seriously discussed alternative writing systems, such as a kana-based system and romanization. None of the alternatives materialized as a practice because simplifying or changing the writing system was useless without creating a new writing style that departed from archaic writing styles. The styles of writing prior to the 1890s were divorced from spoken varieties of Japanese, which had not yet been standardized. In the end, the eclectic approach of the current Japanese writing system that uses kanji and two sets of kana prevailed. After the character debate subsided, there were attempts to control the use of kanji in Japanese, especially in public documents. In addition, in relation to the expansion of Imperial Japan's territory into Asian countries, simplifying Japanese to facilitate communication among various populations of the empire was contemplated, but no policy was actually implemented. In 1942 at the height of WWII the cabinet, upon recommendation of the National Language Council and the Ministry of Education, agreed to restrict use of kanji to the 2,669 characters on a standard kanji list, but the plan was never implemented due to objections from nationalists, who claimed that writing for the imperial court would be impossible without the kanji that fall outside of the list. In their view, restrictions on kanji would damage and disgrace Japanese culture and the national polity, *kokutai*. As such, the political climate stalled the linguistic shift (Gottlieb 1995, Takebe 1981).

Kanji restriction was finally implemented after WWII. Japan's defeat radically changed the political ideology of the country, and as a result linguistic agendas were aligned with the new political ideology and goals, including promotion of democracy. The List of Kanji for Interim Use, *tooyoo kanji hyoo*, which restricted use of kanji in public documents to 1,850 characters on the list, was published as a cabinet order in 1946, only one year after the end of WWII. The new post-war order in Japan favored simplification so that documents were openly accessible to the general public in order to increase government transparency. The list established in 1946 was revised in 1981 as the List of Kanji for General Use, *jooyoo kanji hyoo*, which had 1,945 characters. Almost 30 years later in 2010 the list expanded again as the New List of Kanji for General

Use, *shin jooyoo kanji hyoo*, which now has 2,136 characters.

Kanji has been at the center of discussion because debates over kanji are not simply debates about how to write down Japanese: they are interwoven with political and social agendas. Orthographic debates in general are often firmly linked to political and social ideologies of who should be represented in that particular society. In this sense kanji debates, no matter how trivial they appear to be, can be saturated with ideologies of how society should function and for whom (Shieffelin, Woolard and Kroskirty 1998, Jaffe, Androustopoulos, Sebba and Johnson 2012). It is this historical and ideological significance that the Kanji Subcommittee still carries as a backdrop of its very existence. That kanji has been on the agenda of policy-making bodies since the early 1900s is evidence of the gravity that orthographic issues generate.

The current Kanji Subcommittee (2013–) addresses how to use homophonous kanji that have similar semantics. The subcommittee's work complements a major revision of the kanji list that took place in 2010: the List of Kanji for General Use (1,945 characters) was replaced by the Revised List of Kanji for General Use (2,136 characters)¹⁰ in 2010. The current subcommittee works on specifying usage details of those kanji that are on the new list. In this sense the subcommittee is not pursuing a major change that will have a radical impact on the direction of kanji policy. Nevertheless, it remains an important subcommittee for historical reasons, and the potential it has for shaping daily writing practices is far from negligible.

The present Kanji Subcommittee, *kanji shoo-iinkai*, is in its second term and has held seven official meetings between the first meeting of the term on May 17, 2013 and the last meeting so far on January 31, 2014. The Kanji Subcommittee for the present administrative year has fifteen members, including university professors, writers, and individuals from the media such as an NHK¹¹ newscaster. The chair of the subcommittee is Uchida Nobuko, an auditor at the University of Tsukuba, whose academic expertise is developmental psychology. In addition to official meetings, it held nine preparatory meetings called *uchiawase kai*. Holding preparatory meetings where members preselected kanji items to be discussed was proposed during the second session of the subcommittee to aid regular meetings. The members of the preparatory meeting include the chair, vice chair, and the officials of the Ministry (MEXT 2013a).

¹⁰ *Kaitei jooyoo kanji hyoo*

¹¹ NHK stands for *Nippon Hoosoo Kyookai* 'Japan Broadcasting Corporation'

The topics of the Division discussions are focused on clarifications of homophonous kanji usages. When there are multiple kanji that have the same reading, there necessarily are ambiguous cases as to which kanji should be used. If the meanings of the homophonous kanji are closely related, further distinctions need to be made as to which kanji can be considered 'correct' for that particular meaning. The subcommittee produced a list of such ambiguous, homophonous kanji, and set the guideline for their usage. The agenda of the Kanji Subcommittee followed from the former session's recommendation to revise the 1972 guideline on homophonous kanji usage developed by what was then Kokugo Shingikai. The original guidelines, which were over forty years old, had an addendum created in 2010, but in the Division's view a new, integrated version was in order.

The new guideline on homophonous kanji includes 133 groups of kanji, most of them pairs.¹² For example, *hana* 'flower' has two kanji that can be used, and one of them refers to flower(s), and the kanji 花 should be used. On the other hand, *hana* is often specifically used to mean brilliance and beauty, as in *hanayakani* 'beautifully' and the kanji 華 should be used in this case. In some cases, more than two kanji can be used to write phonologically identical words. For example, the verb *hakaru*, 'to measure,' has six different kanji that correspond to the phonological form: 図る: 計る: 測る: 量る: 謀る: 諮る. Although no distinction is made in speaking, 量 should be used when weight is measured, while 測 should be used when length or height is measured. Further, when time is measured, 計 should be used. The guidelines are not intended to serve as policies that are implemented. The rationale provided for this control is that a lack of guidelines causes confusion and people find it '*komaru*' [troublesome]. Further, the claim that writers are not certain how to use each kanji appropriately is justified by the result of a survey that the Kokugo Division conducts every few years (MEXT 2012a).

The guidelines clarify the semantics of each kanji by providing both definitions and examples of use. The new guideline is meant to replace the 1972 guideline, which lacked usage examples. The discussion on what counts as the norm for usage comes from the consensus among the committee members. This means that the norm is set by those who are considered knowledgeable, but the authenticity is not necessarily derived directly from historical sources, such as kanji dictionaries or documents from the past.

2) The Japanese Language Education Subcommittee

The Japanese Language Education Subcommittee, *nihongo kyooiku shoo-iinkai*, is a committee created under the Kokugo Shingikai in 2007 to discuss matters of teaching Japanese to non-native speakers. That teaching Japanese to non-native speakers is discussed in a governmental subcommittee that is subsumed under a 'Kokugo' division of the Cultural Council is symbolic of the language ideology that permeates the social order. As discussed earlier, the term *kokugo* means 'nation's language' and the idea is a modern construct that was created to produce a unified national identity through the symbolic power of language. Past nationalist discourse bestowed *kokugo* with high moral and esthetic values in addition to functioning as a communicative tool for the nation. This connotation of *kokugo*, which assumes Japan is a nation-state, was once described as 'the spiritual blood of the nation,' and it contrasts with the term *nihongo*, Japanese language, which is primarily used to refer to the language as one of the languages in the world. The term *nihongo kyooiku* is used for teaching Japanese to non-native Japanese speakers, while *kokugo kyooiku* is used to refer to Japanese as a subject in school in Japan, which assumes that the learners are Japanese citizens who are native speakers of Japanese. Although the term *nihongo* currently does not seem to carry the moral and esthetic overtones that accompany the term *kokugo*, it is not entirely a neutral notion free of any ideological implications: During the colonial period *nihongo* was considered to bear the function of transferring culture by which the Japanese spirit could be instilled in the learners of the language (see also Footnote 3). The current Kokugo Division is discussing teaching Japanese to non-native speakers of Japanese who reside within Japan, i.e., *seikatsusha no tameno nihongo kyooiku*, and the symbolism of the categorization and labeling of the division may suggest that teaching Japanese as second language is subsumed under the notion and ideology of *kokugo* with all of its connotations.

The Japanese Language Education Subcommittee (JLES) under the Kokugo Division held its first meeting on July 25, 2007. Normally, the subcommittee holds several meetings per year. As of the end of the fiscal year in March 2014, it had held 58 meetings over its first six and a half years. The first subcommittee under the new arrangement in 2007 had six members who were university professors and directors of organizations that were engaged

12 The homophonous words may also be viewed as one polysemous word whose orthographic conventions are distinguished by each meaning.

in Japanese language education. Among them were Nishihara Suzuko, then professor at Tokyo Women's College and the elected chair of the subcommittee, and Sugito Seiju, Director of the National Language Research Institute (NLRI) at that time and the vice chair of the subcommittee.

The JLES for April 2013–March 2014, the most recent fiscal year, had thirteen members, including university professors, representatives from organizations that have stakes in Japanese language teaching: Ito Sukero, professor of Tokyo University of Foreign Studies who specializes in teaching Japanese as a foreign language, served as the chair of the subcommittee, and Sugito Seiju, an emeritus researcher of the NLRI¹³, who is also the chair of the overarching Kokugo Division, served as the vice chair of this subcommittee as well. Other members include Kato Sanae a Japanese language teacher in a private language school, Inoue Hiroshi, public relations director of the Japan Business Federation, *keidanren*, and Yoshio Keisuke, councilor to the president of the Japan Foundation. The JLES met seven times in Tokyo during the fiscal year 2013–2014. At meetings in locations throughout Japan it gathered information from various organizations and educators that were actively engaged in Japanese language education. Surveys of practitioner opinions were conducted at local gatherings, such as workshops for local Japanese language education coordinators, as well as at professional conferences at the national level, such as Conference on Japanese Language Education hosted by the Agency for Cultural Affairs.

Most recently the subcommittee produced a hefty 141-page report, 'Perspectives on major issues in promoting Japanese language education,' that discusses eleven key issues related to Japanese as a foreign language (MEXT 2014). It has compiled relevant statistics and an array of opinions, reporting on the state of Japanese language education rather than making a particular point. Because the needs of Japanese language learners are varied, and the practices at local levels are uneven, the subcommittee is still surveying the diverse field. The report reviewed eleven issues in five major areas: 1) systemic issues in promoting Japanese language education, 2) the content and method of Japanese language education, 3) personnel issues in Japanese language education, 4) research on Japanese language education, and 5) other issues. The eleven issues have been discussed consistently in successive terms over the past six and a half years. Most of the factual material in the report was inherited from previous subcommittee work, but new material has been added for this fiscal year from

several hearings held at conferences, workshops, and gatherings of local JSL coordinators. As Gottlieb (2012) points out, local governments and communities have been the first to recognize the multilingual reality within their borders, and hence they have been the on-the-ground experts and facilitators with practical knowledge about delivering services to foreign residents and creating programs to interact with foreign residents.

The JLES surveyed "eleven key issues" in detail. The review may read like a list of issues with no definite solutions provided or suggested because the subcommittee is still assessing the current state and emerging developments in the field. The report starts with a review of the current state of immigration in Japan, giving statistics and analysis based on governmental data on the number of foreign residents and their nationalities, visa status, affiliations, as well as institutions and organization that are engaged in Japanese language education for learners of Japanese as a second or foreign language. The review emphasizes the recognition that foreign residents have increased over the long span of thirty years, although the number of foreign residents has declined slightly since the peak year of 2008: the number of registered foreign residents in 2008 was 2,217,426, while it was 2,038,159 in 2012 (MEXT 2014: 5).

The first segment of the report 'On the system of promoting Japanese language education (*nihongokyoiku no suishin taisei nituite*)' addresses two issues: Issue 1 is a vision of Japanese language education; and Issue 2 concerns effective and efficient systems to promote Japanese language education. The discussion pointed out that a systematic immigration policy on the part of the national government is in order for an effective policy on Japanese language education for foreign residents. This is because, the report states that in various practice sites, Japanese language classrooms have come to function as a nexus point for cultural exchange with local Japanese residents and for the Japanese learners to participate in local activities. Assisting foreign residents in handling daily activities and clearing legal issues, however, may fall outside of the capacity of the particular organization that are currently in charge of Japanese language education. The multifunctional nature of such locations and organizations points to a lack of government involvement, which should offer coherent and overarching policies that are explicitly related to immigration and foreign residents. Regarding effective and efficient systems to promote Japanese language education, the report requests the government clarify the roles that

13 The National Language Research Institute.

various groups and organizations should play. The clarification of responsibilities and roles, the report argues, will facilitate the effectiveness of various Japanese language education services, such as colleges, language schools, or community networks. The report draws on extensive statistical data to show the current status of Japanese language education to foreign residents: statistics on foreign visitors and residents, support for multicultural coexistence (*tabunka kyoosei*), and the issue of the government role in and support for Japanese language education. It also offers data that define the issue from the perspective of Japanese language learners, including the difficulties and problems they are facing.

The second segment concerns the content and method of teaching the Japanese language: Issue 3 is about creating standards for and assessment of Japanese language teaching, and Issue 4 concerns dissemination and utilization of common teaching curriculum to be used in local Japanese language classrooms. Regarding Issue 3, the report points out that as residents stay longer in Japan and their needs become more diverse, there has been a growing need to reconsider standards of Japanese language education. For example, the Japanese Language Proficiency Test has been developed primarily for adult learners, and the test takers are mostly college students (49%) and adult workers (27%) (<http://jlpt.jp/statistics/index.html>), but when families stay longer in Japan, children's education calls for guidelines that are different from the standards for adult learners of Japanese. In addition, in order to assess the language abilities of all learners, tests that are designed for college students and businessmen are inadequate, and supplementary assessment methods and varied forms of certification should be considered. For example, instead of setting a goal of passing a proficiency test, portfolios may be included in the assessment and certification for some residents. The subcommittee discussed Issue 4 above and concluded that the existing curriculum plan was not utilized by local practitioners, and greater efforts should be made to explain the curriculum plan and to improve it based on user feedback.

The third segment discusses three related issues. Issue 5 is about certification and qualification of Japanese language teachers. It questions, given that nationwide volunteers comprise a major segment of staffing for Japanese education programs, whether the current Japanese Language Teaching Competency Test is ideal for teachers of Japanese language for foreign residents and whether a new certification system should be created. Issue 6 addresses the difficulty of training Japanese language

teachers at the local level. The difficulty stems from the diverse roles teachers and volunteers in the local programs are expected to play. Committee members pointed out that research should be done on the current involvement of universities and language schools in Japanese language education for foreign residents. Traditionally, training Japanese language teachers focused on how to teach Japanese to foreign students enrolled in colleges and university Japanese programs. Those students' needs and backgrounds can be very different from the majority of long-term residents. Issue 7 calls for an examination of the effect volunteers have on the current system. Reliance on volunteers is creating uneven access to Japanese language education because availability of the volunteers and quality of instruction are not always secured. The report calls for an examination of the system, and stresses the need to devise a new approach to this issue.

The fourth segment addresses research on Japanese language education and the system to support the endeavor. Issue 8 calls for research on Japanese language education for residents at the national level. To draw a plan and implement policies, the report states, the Agency for Cultural Affairs should take the initiative in conducting research on the topic, collaborating with the National Language Research Institute, ministries, local governments, colleges and the Association of Japanese Language Teachers.

The last segment of the report addresses issues that are peripheral yet important. Issue 9 advocates for coordinated efforts to solve the problems that foreign residents face. The subcommittee recognizes that foreign residents face a number of challenges in their lives in Japan, and language is only one aspect of the challenges. Because residents need to address multiple, including legal, issues, it is difficult to learn Japanese without clearing up other problems. Thus, the report calls for relevant governmental agencies to coordinate policies and efforts to address foreign residents' problems. The committee also hopes to clarify the role that Japanese language proficiency plays in solving those problems in turn. Issue 10 reiterates the urgent demand for improvement in Japanese language education for children. Due to systemic and organizational shortcomings and rigidities within the school system, there is at present no guaranteed Japanese language education for children of foreign residents. The final issue, Issue 11, calls for strengthening Japanese language education efforts overseas by joining forces with Japanese language education within Japan. In addition, the report demands MEXT align its efforts to promote

Japanese language education with other ministries and institutions, particularly the Japan Foundation, which is under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and responsible for Japanese language education and promotion of Japanese culture overseas.

The report by the Japanese Language Education Subcommittee, i.e., Japanese Language Education for Residents, *seikatsusha no tameno nihongo kyooiku*, comes at a time of critical importance for the direction of Japan as a nation state: Prime Minister Abe explicitly stated that immigration is a viable option for Japan to solve its population issues (*Imin ukeire no zehi* 2014.2.13 *Asahi Shinbun*). With his comment, immigration has catapulted to the front of the national agenda as a solution for population decline and economic and social sustainability. Although various political, social, and economic factors are behind Abe's statement, the fact remains that the topic of immigration has now emerged as a major and viable policy alternative that begs for serious attention from a nation that throughout its modern history has thrived on the idea of 'homogeneity.'

In this context the Japanese Language Education Subcommittee is an important component of the government's response to issues surrounding foreign residents, which the subcommittee acknowledges. Emphasizing the magnitude of the social problem, it points out that the response should involve several ministries. It explains that responding to foreign residents' needs at the local government level is no longer effective since foreign residents may not be concentrated in particular areas despite that over a long span of time the number of foreign residents have increased. In recent years, foreign residents have spread over various locations, often making their existence and needs invisible or apparently negligible at the local level. In addition, local governments may vary in how they respond to foreign residents and their needs, and this situation has often led to uneven and inconsistent services. The subcommittee calls for governmental involvement in addressing these issues with coherent policies that provide solid background support for Japanese language education.

Another issue that the Japanese Language Education Subcommittee calls attention to is further governmental involvement in the education of children who need Japanese language instruction to attend Japanese schools. Foreign residents' children who need Japanese language instruction are not well-served by the current system not only because they lack adequate linguistic assistance but also because of a lack of curriculum flexibility. Starting in spring 2014, however, special curricula can be implemented for children whose proficiency in Japanese prevents

them from receiving schooling in Japanese. They include children whose parents do not speak Japanese as well as Japanese children who grew up in foreign countries and do not speak Japanese appropriate for their age level.

Overall, the Japanese Language Education Subcommittee is a prominent subcommittee that has been active for seven years since 2007. The report, however, also points out that there is a need to integrate and reexamine the resources that are dispersed among multiple ministries: The Japan Foundation under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has been responsible for promoting Japanese culture and language overseas; the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare oversees and regulates foreign labor in Japan; and the Ministry of Education, Culture, Science, Sports and Technology has been actively involved in Japanese language education in Japan, overseeing Japanese language schools, colleges, high schools and compulsory education.

5. Conclusion

This paper has reviewed and critically evaluated recent developments in Japanese language policy during the most recent Japanese fiscal year, from April 2013 to March 2014. It has focused on the Kokugo Division of the Cultural Council under the Ministry of Education, Culture, Science, Sports and Technology. The Kokugo Division had two active subcommittees, the Kanji Subcommittee and the Japanese Language Education Subcommittee.

This term's Kanji Subcommittee has completed work on setting a concrete guideline and examples for using homophonous kanji items. Some kanji with the same readings produce problems determining which kanji should be used for a particular meaning, especially when meaning differences among the homophonous kanji are subtle. The committee's work is to update the usage guideline for those homophonous kanji following their publication in the 2010 kanji list, the Revised List of Kanji for General Use. The new usage guideline replaces and complements two previous guidelines for homophonous kanji usage, '*iji-dookun' no kanji no yoohoorei*, which was published first in 1972 under the Kokugo Council, and the 2010 list published by the Cultural Council.

Creating a new guideline on the correct use of similar kanji seems to be a relatively minor part of norm-making. A major decision of which kanji to include in the list had already been made before the current subcommittee was formed, and while the task of the present committee is a follow-up to the major reform of the list, the work is relatively

uncontroversial. In contrast, the prohibition of the use of kanji that fall outside of approved lists in personal names provoked lawsuits (Enmanji 2005, Watanabe 2007). In this sense it is not a site for what Blommaert (1999) calls 'language ideological debates,' which are usually evidenced by entextualized ideological struggles for authority in language matters.

Although homophonous kanji usage is not a topic that inspires heated debates, research on language ideologies informs us that even the seemingly trivial can represent important concerns for language users. According to Cameron (2012[1995]), language users often attempt to control the use of language based on their ideas of what is correct, beautiful, efficient, or other desirable qualities. Cameron has named such behaviors and attitudes as 'verbal hygiene.'¹⁴ Prescribing how to use homophonous kanji with similar meanings can be described as verbal hygiene that involves a government body, the Kokugo Division, in this case.

The reason for the existence of the subcommittee is warranted by the results of a survey on public opinions about language, which the Agency for Cultural Affairs conducts every few years. Questions about kanji were on the general questionnaire, *kokugo ni kansuru yoron choosa* 'Public Opinion Survey on Kokugo' (MEXT 2012a). A question asked in 2012 was whether the respondents have ever felt unsure (*mayotta koto ga aru*) about which homophonous kanji was the most appropriate for a particular context. Nearly seventy-five percent of the respondents answered positively, by choosing either 'often' or 'sometimes' from multiple choice answers. The responses were interpreted to indicate that the use of homophonous kanji needed further clarification. The Managing Committee of the Kokugo Division, *mondaiten seiri iinkai*, also recommended that the issue should be addressed in future discussions in the Kokugo Division (MEXT 2012b, 2013b)

One of the characteristics of the new guideline is that the correctness of each kanji usage came mostly from the opinions of the current members of the subcommittee. First, this means that statistical data on kanji use are not used in the formation of the guidelines. At least in what is made available to the public, it is not clear how the preparatory meetings choose particular kanji for committee discussions. Second, it means that the correctness in kanji usage is not determined by tracing the kanji usage back to the historically most highly revered source of authenticity in kanji scholarship, such as the Kangxi

Dictionary. The dictionary was published in China in 1716, and for over two centuries in Japan it was deemed the authoritative literature for kanji. The members of the subcommittee may have access to and be knowledgeable of the dictionary's use, but rather than upholding the standard derived from what was once regarded as the definitive source of kanji knowledge the authority to determine correctness is in a consensus among the present experts who are also observant of current usage patterns in Japan. The two features above, neither using statistics nor a written source of normativity such as a dictionary, leave some of the discussions in the subcommittee meetings largely dependent on the individual committee member's subjective judgments of what is common and appropriate present-day usage. When the new guideline is published, of course, it will be the new normative document that Japanese writers, particularly government employees, educators, and those in mass media, will consult. In other words, it will become the entextualized document of normativity (Silverstein and Urban 1996).

The Japanese Language Education Subcommittee has compiled a substantive report on major issues in the current state of Japanese language education, 'Perspectives on major issues in promoting Japanese language education (*nihongo kyooiku no suishin ni atteno omona ronten ni kansuru iken no seiri nituite*).' It is, however, still in a preparatory stage and will be used to formulate a comprehensive policy proposal regarding Japanese Language Education for Foreign Residents. This is partially because of the diverse needs of learners of Japanese and the increased complexity that diversification necessarily entails. Foreign residents in Japan are increasing in number and with their varying backgrounds and future intended trajectories so are their needs. In addition, the lack of clear immigration policies and absence of a government agency to address multifaceted issues in immigration are making it difficult to set goals and support learners. The Japanese Language Education Subcommittee also addresses the need for more government involvement on all fronts in multiple parts of the report.

The subcommittee hopes to continue surveying local Japanese language education practices in the next fiscal year, 2014–2015. In particular it will investigate the roles of volunteers and local governments since volunteers support significant local government efforts by participating in Japanese tutoring, cultural exchange, and other related programs and activities.

In a similar vein, the education of foreign resident

14 "...my term for the motley collection of discourses and practices through which people attempt to 'clean up' language and make its structure of its use conform more closely to their ideals of beauty, truth, efficiency, logic, correctness and civility..." (Cameron 2012[1995]: vii)

children is at present an issue that lands between the two fields that the two terms represent, *kokugo* and *nihongo*. *Kokugo* as a school subject does not take into account that a learner is a non-native speaker of Japanese. It assumes that learners are Japanese citizens, and speak Japanese fluently. School-age foreign resident children, however, expose the multilingual reality of Japan and demand the field of *kokugo* confront *nihongo*.

This paper mentioned earlier three factors that are causing the linguistic power landscape in Japan to shift: a population diversified through immigration and the movement of people, the increased visibility of minority languages within Japanese borders, and an increased level and need for communication in foreign languages with other countries. The first factor of linguistic diversity is brought on by the movement of people, including immigrants and visitors who are now long-term residents. The Japanese Language Education Subcommittee has addressed concerns that stem from this issue: Japanese language education for foreign residents. This is the only area for which the Kokugo Division is active.

The issue of minority languages has not been discussed by subcommittees of the Kokugo Division. It may seem logical, if one assumes that endangered languages are by definition not Japanese. Contrary to this assessment, however, the issue of the endangered languages is addressed by the Kokugo Division in a way that proves to be problematic for the recognition of diversity. This problematic recognition is evidenced by the Kokugo Division's budget line allocated for research and archiving projects on endangered languages and vanishing dialects, including the Tohoku Dialects.¹⁵ Most of this research has been conducted by the National Language Research Institute, *kokuritu kokugo kenkyuusho*, since 2009 (<http://www.ninjal.ac.jp/endangered>), immediately after the UNESCO designation of the languages as endangered languages. The research projects collect, analyze, and archive the languages and as such treat them as if they were artifacts, instead of viewing them as living languages whose speakers possess the agency to determine their future. Marginalizing certain types of language has been argued a consequence of modernization and a source of inequality that frames certain languages as belonging to the past (Bauman and Briggs 2003). Symbolically, subsuming the issues of endangered languages under the Kokugo Division, which is in turn subsumed under the Cultural Council, raises questions precisely because of the past connotation that the term *kokugo* introduces and because it suggests that what

Morris-Suzuki (2002) calls 'cosmetic multiculturalism' may be at work. In criticizing the concept of diversity as it is practiced in Japan, Morris-Suzuki points out that the multiplicity of culture and identity is accepted only if it does not involve fundamental change to the system itself but contributes to sustaining the incumbent power. Controlled and standardized diversity of this sort functions to secure the ideology of the homogenous nation-state intact, which is counter to the idea of diversity.

The last factor, the use of English, is not discussed within the Kokugo Division for obvious reasons. It is, however, addressed by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Science, Sports and Technology, which directs the Agency for Cultural Affairs.

In conclusion, the Kokugo Division should be urged to rethink its organizational implications in the near future. That minority languages and Japanese language education for foreign residents are even nominally subsumed under the title of *kokugo* reveals the outdated underlying assumptions that the trinity of Japanese language, nation, and people still bring into effect. This nexus, however, does not map onto the reality of Japan. It is being eroded by intensifying waves of globalization to the extent that Japan is seriously contemplating accepting more immigrants to fill the gap in labor shortages (*gaikokujin ukeire kakudai*). More important, though, Japan may be resisting the necessary shift in an era of quickly expanding and porous borders. In addition to the issue of diversity, the Japanese language may need to deal with the issue of English as the worldwide *de facto lingua franca*. Although Japanese and English are not mutually exclusive and there are abundant examples of bilingual societies, language planning activities from a perspective that moves beyond the Japanese language alone may be called for in the near future.

¹⁵ The projected budget for the fiscal year April 2014 to March 2015 is 31 million yen.

Glossary

Bunka shingikai:

The Cultural Council (2001–present).

Kanji shoo-iinkai:

The Kanji Sub-committee (2005–2010; 2013–present).

Kokugo bunkakai:

The National Language Division [of the Cultural Council] (2001–present).

Kokugo shingikai:

The National Language Council (1934–2001).

MEXT:

The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology.

Nihongo kyooiku shoo-iinkai:

The Japanese Language Education Sub-committee (2001–present).

Rinji kokugo choosa-iinkai:

The Interim National Language Research Committee (1902–1913).

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