English as an official language: 
A comparative study of language policy in Japan and Rwanda

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Abstract

Japan and Rwanda have a couple of linguistic aspects in common; both countries have indigenous languages shared by most of their peoples, and they have never been colonised by an English-speaking country. However, several factors have influenced the decision on whether English should be made an official language of these countries. This paper examines the reasons why Japan did not make English an official language, while Rwanda did.

Firstly, when English was made an official language in Rwanda, ethnic and political powers played an important role. Secondly, Rwanda’s decision to adopt English as an official language was related to its educational situation. Thirdly, economic circumstances influenced the decision to add English to Rwanda’s official languages. Finally, English was generally welcomed by Rwanda’s citizens, whereas Japanese people are not yet ready to accept English as an official language.

1. Introduction

Approximately 50 countries have adopted English as an official language (Ozaki, 2005). Crystal (1997) explains that more than 70 countries had given some type of official status to English by 1997. For example, in the Philippines, both Tagalog-based Filipino and English have been declared as official languages (Ozaki, 2005). In Singapore, English, Mandarin Chinese, Malay, and Tamil are official languages, while Malay is the national language (Ozaki, 2005). In Hong Kong, Mandarin Chinese and English were stipulated as official languages by the Basic Law when the country was returned to the People’s Republic of China from the U.K. in 1997 (Ozaki, 2005). Ozaki (2005) states that English and other languages were adopted as official languages for various reasons. In many cases, it was for historical, racial, and social reasons that a certain language was introduced as an official language in former colonies where that language had taken root. These represented nations were originally multi-ethnic with diverse races and languages (Ozaki, 2005). According to Sauzier-Uchida (2008), if the people of a nation speak a standard language, it can save a great deal of energy and communication costs. She explains that if a nation’s lingua franca is the same as that of the rest of the world, such as English or French, it will promote economic earnings. For this reason, a nation often chooses a language of its former suzerain state as its own official language (Sauzier-Uchida, 2008). Heinrich (2007) reports that Chile and several Asian countries such as South Korea, Malaysia, and Sri Lanka discussed whether some type of official status should be given to English. For instance, in South Korea, it was proposed that English become a second official language in 1999 (Ozaki, 2005).
In Japan in 2000, the late Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi’s Commission on Japan’s Goals in the 21st Century also proposed that English might become an official language of Japan, giving rise to public controversy over the issue. This proposal was not realized, and the debate has not been revived since.

Although the linguistic situation in Rwanda is very similar to that of Japan, English was made an official language in Rwanda in 1996, while it was not in Japan. Like Japan, Rwanda has an indigenous language which is spoken by most of its people, and has never been colonised by any English-speaking countries. This paper examines the reasons why English was not adopted as an official language in Japan, by contrast with Rwanda.

This paper is divided into four parts. The first part examines the Japanese language and language policy in Japan. The second part introduces the then Prime Minister’s commission’s report that contained the suggestion to introduce English as an official language, including arguments for and against this. The third part investigates the linguistic situations and language policy in Rwanda. Finally, a comparison of the reasons for the differences in language policy in Japan and Rwanda is presented.

2. The Japanese language and language policy in Japan

Japan is generally regarded as a monolingual society, even though Gottlieb (2011) claims that there are so many migrants in this country that the ideology of monolingualism is not relevant today. Most Japanese citizens speak Japanese, and it is the de facto national language (Gottlieb, 2011). According to Shiina (1989), on a global basis, it is very rare that the people’s mother tongue is itself the official or national language, as in Japan. However, there is no official language under the law in Japan (Iizuka, 2001). The Japanese language is not specified as the official language of Japan anywhere in the Constitution of Japan (Gottlieb, 2011).

Even though Japanese is the de facto national and official language in Japan, the country has various kinds of dialects or varieties, as is the case with most other countries. While Japan is a very small country, people from different areas speak different dialects. These differ in terms of morphosyntactic, morphophonological, lexical, and phonetic properties (Tsujimura, 1996). People from different regions often do not understand different dialects (Shibatani, 1990). It is the common language (kyoutsuugo) that makes it possible for people from different areas to communicate with one another (Shibatani, 1990).

The Tokyo dialect has become regarded as the standard language, even though standard Japanese has never been created (Shibatani, 1990). After Tokyo became the political and cultural centre of Japan, colloquial language spread throughout the country through literary works, and the Tokyo dialect based on the Edo (former Tokyo) dialect came to gain the status of the standard language (Nakamura, 1989). The standard language, as based on the Tokyo dialect, was strengthened through the system of education and its use in the media (Gottlieb, 2011).

Before Japan was modernised, its linguistic situation was very different to that of today. According to Bekes (2011), its “premodern” linguistic situation, i.e. dating up to circa 1880 (when Japanese society started to take on its modern form), is distinguished by three factors.

The first of Beke’s (2011, p.3) three factors is “diglossia in the written language,” which means different styles of writing. Bekes (2011) explains that these two writing styles were limited to the elites. This situation was found during the Kamakura (1185-1333) and Muromachi (1336-1573) periods (Bekes, 2011).

The second factor is the “consolidation of political power under the Tokugawa shogunate” (Bekes, 2011,
The Tokugawa shogunate was a feudal military government that ruled Japan between 1603 and 1868. According to Kato (1979), the printed media spread and a new schooling system developed in a relatively peaceful and economically wealthy environment under the control of the Tokugawa shogunate. The Tokugawa shogunate was based in Edo, whose status gave shape to a new dialect that had traces of both the eastern and western dialects of Japan (Bekes, 2011). Before the Tokugawa period, the political centre had been Kyoto, the western part of Japan.

The third factor is that there was “no attempt at language standardization” around the mid-19th century (Bekes, 2011, p.3). According to Bekes (2011), due to Japanese political unification at this time, language standardisation was not promoted. During the Tokugawa period, Japan was divided into many local feudal domains, which were governed by local feudal lords. Gottlieb (2007) explains that the feudal domains were firmly shut off from each other and that, as a result, local dialects developed with little contact between them. On the other hand, in order to prevent local feudal lords from having too much power, the Tokugawa shogunate made them travel all the way to Edo and spend every other year there (Nenzi, 2008). In this way, those who went back and forth between Edo and their domains contributed to the formation of the de facto standard based on the Edo dialect (Gottlieb, 2007).

When the Tokugawa period ended, Japan gradually began to modernise. The Meiji regime (1868-1912) abolished the feudal and caste systems, established compulsory education, improved the civil service, and introduced military service, the Western calendar, and many other systems (Meiji era, 2013). It was around this time that the Meiji government took steps toward standardising the language (Bekes, 2011).

In order to prevent the nation from being invaded by other powers, Japan stressed the ideology of monolingualism until the last years of the 20th century, seeking to prove that Japan was composed of one people with one language (Gottlieb, 2011). Uniformity in linguistic and ethnic identity in Japan was achieved to a high degree, because language policies were consistent, supported, and regularly exercised in the Meiji period (Gottlieb, 2007). Coulmas (as cited in Nakasuka, 2002) explains that the Japanese language transformed into the language of the general public within a short period. As a result, the process of the language standardisation did not prevent the society from advancing and that the language never lost its identity (Coulmas as cited in Nakasuka, 2002).

In the late 19th century, the Meiji government started to attack certain varieties as part of its language reforms (Sakai as cited in Hiramoto, 2010). The Ainu and Okinawan languages were suppressed until the late 1990s (Gottlieb, 2011). It was found that in several regions, dialect punishment boards (hougenfuda) were given to students who used their dialects in the classroom. Asano (as cited in Kondo, 2005) points out that late in the Meiji era in Okinawa, common-language education played an important role in Japan’s assimilation policy, and that by 1910, the dialect punishment boards functioned to control the dialects. Harada (2009) found that in classrooms in Kagoshima Prefecture, students were punished for speaking their dialect and rewarded for using the common language. The same kinds of dialect punishment boards as those in Okinawa were also used in Kagoshima (Harada, 2009). According to Harada (2009), the practice was deemed necessary as people with jobs outside their prefecture found difficulty communicating with those from other regions.
3. English as the official second language in Japan

According to Holmes (2013), an official language is defined as a language that may be used for the purpose of government business and that serves practically, rather than symbolically. Ozaki (2005) states that an official language is the language that a nation declares as the language for the functions of judicial, executive, and legislative administration of the nation. He also explains that in a country where several languages are used, an official language serves as a communications’ medium in the public institutions of the country.

Historically in Japan, plans to make a foreign language the official language were proposed during the Meiji era (1868-1912) as well as the period when the Americans occupied Japan (1945-1952) (Coulmas; Carroll; Heinrich as cited in Heinrich, 2007). Ozaki (2005) reports that in 1872, Arinori Mori, the founder of Japan’s modern education system, first advocated English as the official language in Japan and the abolition of the Japanese language. Nakasuka (2002) states that Mori claimed that Japanese civilization would not make enough progress if a language such as English, which was powerful in the business world, was not adopted. Nakasuka (2002) explains that Tatsui Baba, a leader of the Freedom and People’s Rights Movement in Japan and author of the English book *An Elementary Grammar of the Japanese Language, with Easy Progressive Exercises*, opposed Mori’s argument. Baba stated that although some nations had adopted another nation’s language, a conquering power had forced them to adopt its own language, against the wishes of the colonised nations. He added that even if they were forced to use a powerful conqueror’s language, they would not give up their useful mother tongue. However, in 1946, Naoya Shiga, a Japanese novelist, argued that the Japanese language should be abolished and that French should be used in Japan (Ozaki, 2005). Currently, a number of people claim that English should be an official language in Japan.

In 2000, the late Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi’s Commission on Japan’s Goals in the 21st Century submitted a report including the proposal to introduce English as an official language to the Prime Minister, which caused great controversy.

According to the Office for the Prime Minister’s Commission (1999) and the Prime Minister’s Commission on Japan’s Goals in the 21st Century (2000), on 26 March, 1999, the then Prime Minister Obuchi decided to set up the Prime Minister’s Commission on Japan’s Goals in the 21st Century, and nominated 16 private citizens as its members. A report on the future direction of Japan for the 21st century was to be presented by the commission. The mandate of the commission aimed to promote a nationwide debate on the matter and consider its suggestions for mid- and long-term policy. The commission submitted its final report to the Prime Minister on 18 January, 2000.

At a meeting on 21 April, 1999, five subcommittees were created and 35 other experts added from diverse fields. These subcommittees put together their reports, which were combined into the final report of the commission.

Chapter 1 (overview) of the final report referred to the possibility of designating English as an official language of Japan.

In the long term, it may be possible to make English an official second language, but national debate will be needed [sic]. First, though, every effort should be made to equip the population with a working knowledge of English [sic]. This is not simply a matter of foreign-language education. It should be regarded as a strategic imperative (The Prime Minister’s Commission on Japan’s Goals
Ozaki (2005) explains that the anxiety over the declining economy in Japan led to the advocacy of English as an official language, which was intended to make Japanese more competitive internationally. Nakasuka (2002) also states that advocacy of English as an official language emerged from the recognition that Japan would fall behind other nations if the Japanese did not master English as a lingua franca. Heinrich (2007) reports that this proposal was put forward because of the policy of making Japan a knowledge society. Iizuka (2001) claimed that the proposal to make English an official language in Japan could no longer be brushed off by saying that Japan was not one of the former British colonies.

Kanai (2000) expressed concerns about Japan’s lesser world competitiveness in the international arena. He indicated that underdeveloped information technology (IT) was to some degree to blame for its lesser competitiveness, which he attributed to the English language. He therefore claimed that English should be made an official language in Japan, and that its system of English education should be improved so that people would become more proficient in English. Kanai’s (2000) anxiety and claims coincide with those conveyed by the Prime Minister’s commission in its report. In Chapter 1 of the report, the commission expressed its anxiety with the words. “We share a sense of urgency. We fear that as things stand Japan is heading for decline [sic]” (The Prime Minister’s Commission on Japan’s Goals in the 21st Century, 2000, p.1). In Section 2, titled “Global literacy” of the same chapter, the commission claims that “the basic components of this new literacy are the mastery of information-technology tools, such as computers and the Internet, and the mastery of English as the international lingua franca” (The Prime Minister’s Commission on Japan’s Goals in the 21st Century, 2000, p.4). The report added that the English ability of Japanese people was very low, referring to their scores in the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), which were ranked the lowest in Asia in 1998.

Interestingly, at about the same time, a project team of the Democratic Party of Japan, which was not a ruling party, also put forward a proposal similar to that of the Prime Minister’s commission. In its interim report, the Democratic Party of Japan aimed to promote a bilingual society in Japan and hoped to introduce English as an official language (Project team investigating the introduction of English as an official language of the Democratic Party of Japan, 2000). They argued that even though further investigation would be needed to make English an official language in Japan, the proficiency in English was needed in order for Japan to survive in today’s globally competitive and information-technology-driven world.

As can be seen, what all of the proponents of the introduction of English as an official language in Japan have in common seems to relate to the weakening of Japan’s global competitiveness, namely, its economic situation. As Sauzier-Uchida (2008) states, the world allows the dominance of English, because utilitarianism puts greater emphasis on economic value. According to Kaplan and Baldauf (2011), business generally plays an important role in developing language policy. Gottlieb (2011) explains that political and/or economic matters are usually connected to language ideologies.

When a nation feels the need to change, the advocacy of a foreign language as an official language tends to emerge, as in the Meiji Period when Japan started to modernise as well as in the period after the Second World War. These were the times when the statesman Mori and novelist Shiga advocated the adoption of foreign languages as an official language in Japan, respectively.

Ozaki (2005) is opposed to the idea that English should be an official language in Japan. He claims that
making English an official language is a methodology which is harmful to current Japan, rather than representing a necessary policy. Opponents of the introduction of English as an official language argue that it would have an unwelcome influence on Japanese culture (Heinrich, 2007). In his interview with Mainichi Shimbun, Professor Nakamura claims that the introduction of English as an official language in Japan would mean giving up on ethnic identity (Kojima, 2000). Even though many other Asian countries attach importance to the English language for their economic development and create supportive English learning environments, Ozaki (2005) claims that placing a high value on English and designating it as an official language are completely different matters.

Heinrich (2007) explains that a major criticism against the introduction of English as an official language in Japan concerns the connection between language and the power possessed by native speakers of English. Takao Suzuki, a prominent linguist in Japan, criticised Kiichi Miyazawa, a late politician who served as the Prime Minister, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, as well as holding other important posts as a statesman, of talking with the then U.S. President George W. Bush only in English, without any interpreters in their diplomatic negotiations (Shimokawa, 1999). He claims that Miyazawa negotiated on his opponent’s terms and waived the principle of language equality.

The opponents of the adoption of English as an official language claim that Japanese society would suffer from a split between those who are skilled and unskilled in English (Heinrich, 2007). Nakasuka (2002) posits that if English were adopted as an official language in Japan, the society would be divided into an upper and lower class, and Japan would become a nation fragmented by the two different languages. Furthermore, even though Funabashi (2000) is a strong proponent of the introduction of English as an official language, he explains that the problem of both English and French as the official languages in Canada has divided the country. He also states that the Canadian people still hold mixed feelings about having both languages as the official languages.

Nakasuka (2002) claims that it is more important to consider how to communicate with Brazilians of Japanese parentage and Chinese living in Japan than to make English an official language. Most of these people do not speak either Japanese or English very well. According to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, “everyone shall be entitled to […] have the free assistance of an interpreter if he cannot understand or speak the language used in court” (Kobe University, 2014). However, the fact is that there are not enough court interpreters, especially for minority languages, in Japan (Sugawara, 1998), which often causes trouble.

Ozaki (2005) explains that Tanaka makes a fundamental criticism of adopting English as an official language, in the sense that Japan has no regions where English is spoken as an everyday language and very few of its citizens have any relation to the foreign language in their daily lives. In his interview with Mainichi Shimbun, Professor Nakamura claims that it is natural for Japanese people not to be able to speak English, because unlike some other Southeast Asian countries that were colonised by the United Kingdom and the United States, English has never been used in daily life in Japan (Kojima, 2000).

Although the project team of the Democratic Party of Japan (2000) hoped to introduce English as an official language in Japan, they admitted that in countries that had adopted English as an official language, this language had already become widespread, because they were colonies of English-speaking countries or English was useful to them as multilingual nations. Nakamura (as cited in Ozaki, 2005) also claims that the
situation of Japan is completely different from that of other Asian countries that were colonized by English-speaking countries. Suzuki, in his interview with Mainichi Shimbun, explains that the reason why intellectuals in India and Singapore are fluent in English is because these used to be colonies of the United Kingdom (Shimokawa, 1999).

In his interview, Nakamura explains that there are three types of circumstances where a language is made official: (1) conquerors force the conquered to use the conquerors’ languages, (2) in order to give their own language a higher status, the conquered make it an official language under the law; and (3) in a multi-ethnic state, an official language is introduced to unify the country (Kojima, 2000). He explains that Japan’s situation does not fall under any of these three types of circumstance (Kojima, 2000).

Ozaki (2005) claims that there has never been a nation that has adopted a certain foreign language as its official language solely for the purpose of developing its economy and efficiency strategy. However, there is now one country that has adopted English as an official language partly for the economic reasons. Furthermore, as with Japan, this country has never been colonised by an English-speaking country, and most of its population shares one indigenous language. We turn now to the African nation of Rwanda.

4. Language policy in Rwanda

In Rwanda, located in central Africa, there were three official languages between the years of 1996 and 2008: Kinyarwanda, French, and English. Kinyarwanda is an indigenous language shared by most of the people in this country. French was adopted as an official language when Belgium governed the country between 1890 and 1962 (Steflja, 2012). English was also announced as an official language in 1996, two years after the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) took control in Rwanda (Steflja, 2012). The fact that one indigenous language is shared by all of the people in Rwanda makes it special among the African nations, since many of the other countries utilise foreign languages in order for their citizens to communicate with one another (Government of the Republic of Rwanda, 2014). As Nakamura explains in the previous section, historically, a certain language is made official in a nation mainly due to a colonial policy and/or a language policy in a multilingual nation (Kojima, 2000). However, Rwanda adopted English as one of its official languages, even though this country has a native language used by the majority of its citizens and has never been colonised by an English-speaking nation, which makes it a very rare case.

English was made an official language of Rwanda in 1996. Of its population, 99.4% speak Kinyarwanda, 8% French, and 4% English (Rosendal, 2009; Samuelson and Freedman, 2010). French was the linguistic legacy left by Belgium, which had colonised Rwanda and established its school system (Samuelson & Freedman, 2010).

6 April 1994 marked the onset of the genocide in Rwanda (Forges, 1994). Extremist Hutu began massacring the Tutsi minority people after the then Hutu President Juvenal Habyarimana had allegedly been assassinated (Forges, 1994). Between 700 thousand and one million people fled to neighbouring countries such as Uganda, Zaire (now known as the Democratic Republic of the Congo), Tanzania, Burundi, and Kenya (Hasselriis, 2010; Mainichi Shimbun, 1994). It was Ugandan Tutsi Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) members that stopped the genocide, and they spoke English (Samuelson & Freedman, 2010). Since English is an official language in Uganda, Tanzania, and Kenya (Central Intelligence Agency), most of those who returned from these countries to Rwanda do not speak French, but English (Hasselriis, 2010; Mainichi Shimbun, 1994;
Samuelson & Freedman, 2010). In this way, after the RPF, who were English speakers, took power in Rwanda, they added English to its official languages, along with Kinyarwanda and French (Samuelson & Freedman, 2010).

On the other hand, the official language status of French was abolished as part of the linguistic reforms in 2008 (Steflja, 2012). Between 1996 and 2008, under the language policy, Kinyarwanda was used to give instruction in the first three years of schooling, and after this, English or French was to be chosen by the students as the main language of instruction (McGreal, 2008). However, schools and the universities no longer use French as a medium of instruction (Samuelson & Freedman, 2010). English is now used as the instruction language from the first grade, and the secondary school entrance examinations are given in English in grade six (Samuelson and Freedman, 2010). All primary and secondary school teachers are required to take a five-week intensive English training course during their long holidays (Government of the Republic of Rwanda, 2014). Furthermore, French does not function as an official language in public service (Samuelson & Freedman, 2010). Public service workers take English lessons, and officials make speeches combining words from English and Kinyarwanda, and taxi drivers are making efforts to use easy phrases in English (McCrummen, 2008). The new language policy is considered necessary by politicians in order for Rwanda’s reforms after the genocide to be successful (Samuelson & Freedman, 2010).

Rwandan officials stress that they switch the languages solely for economic reasons (McCrummen, 2008). Rwanda’s economic problems are serious (Steflja, 2012). According to Samuelson and Freedman (2010), the government argues that the nation will be reconciled by greater wealth, and that this wealth will be made possible by improving living standards and opportunities for all Rwandans. Stefija (2012) explains that in order to join the East African Community (EAC) and relieve economic relations with its neighboring countries and South Africa, the Rwandan government decided to change its main official language from French to English. According to Samuelson and Freedman (2010), the Rwandan government claims that instruction in education should be given in English due to the growth of this language in the fields of science, business, and economic development. Stefija (2012) also explains that policymakers anticipate that the adoption of English as an official language will lead to increased standards of living. The government claims that English allows children to gain more access to information and knowledge, and that it is the working language for most of the people (Government of the Republic of Rwanda, 2014).

Rwandan officials assert that the decision to drop French as one of its official languages was purely due to economic reasons, and that it was not related to the nation’s bitter relationship with France (McCrummen, 2008). However, it is widely believed that there are several other reasons. Stefija (2012) indicated that in order to eliminate genocide ideology, Rwanda decided to put French at a distance. After the genocide in 1994, the Rwandan government has vigorously tried to improve conditions and form a new image of the country (Stefija, 2012). The government also hopes to leave behind the colonial past, fashion a new image of Rwanda, and employ English-speaking returnees in its public service (Stefija, 2012).

In addition, relations between France and Rwanda have been soured by the wars and genocide (Samuelson & Freedman, 2010). After the genocide in 1994, the French language started to be regarded as less important, since the new leadership preferred English, and it is the United States that mainly supported Rwanda (Hasselriis, 2010; Stefija, 2012). In 2006, in the French court, the current president of Rwanda, Paul Kagame, was charged with bringing down a plane that the then Hutu president Habyarimana was aboard,
which killed him and set off the genocide in the country (Hasselriis, 2010; McCrummen, 2008). In response to this accusation, the French Embassy and the French cultural centre were shut down, and Radio France Internationale was taken off the air (Hasselriis, 2010). Furthermore, Rwanda condemned France for helping provide weapons to the initiators of the genocide (Hasselriis, 2010).

There seem to be two types of arguments that are against the language policy in Rwanda: disadvantage in education and the inequality of its citizens.

Samuelson and Freedman (2010) claim that if English is used for education, many people will be disadvantaged, rather than advantaged. Steflja (2012) argues that since the policy of English as the sole language of instruction was implemented, the education system in Rwanda has faced serious obstacles, one of which has been securing sufficient instructors proficient in English (Steflja, 2012). Primary school teachers who used to teach in French have to go to school to study English at night and at weekends, while at the same time teaching their students in English (Samuelson & Freedman, 2010). Even though the government believes that almost all the teachers will be proficient in teaching in English in several years (Government of the Republic of Rwanda, 2014), thousands of Rwandan teachers have been fired due to their inability to teach English (Hasselriis, 2010). Even the elites who use French have limited access to essential resources to learn English (Samuelson & Freedman, 2010). Samuelson and Freedman (2010) claim that there are few opportunities to improve literacy in Kinyarwanda since students have to study English from the first year of primary school. They also argue that students may never develop higher-level literacy in English.

Steflja (2012) claims that the language shift from French to English is likely to influence the equality of citizens. English is the elite language in Rwanda, and these elites can keep privilege and power with the language (Samuelson & Freedman, 2010). Using English as the only language of work will cause problems because this may bring advantage to groups who speak English and disadvantage to those who do not (Steflja, 2012).

In summary, in Rwanda, there were previously three official languages: Kinyarwanda, French, and English from 1996 to 2008. Kinyarwanda is an indigenous language spoken by most citizens, while French became an official language because Rwanda had been a former colony of Belgium. English was added to its official languages in 1996, when the English-speaking RPF took power. The government decided that it would remove French from its official languages mainly for reasons relating to economy and politics.

5. Factors that differentiate the language policies of Japan and Rwanda

As can be seen, Rwanda is rare as a nation having adopted English as an official language, since it was originally a largely monolingual society and has never been a colony of an English-speaking nation. In these respects, Japan and Rwanda have a lot in common. In addition, its economic situation is one of the reasons that Rwanda chose English as its main official language. This is also very similar to the reason why the then Prime Minister Obuchi’s commission suggested that English might become Japan’s second official language. However, despite these similarities, Japan has not adopted English as an official language.

Rwanda’s ethnic conflicts and politics were largely involved when English was announced as an official language and also when French was dropped, which is not relevant to the case of Japan. As Holmes (2013, p.106) explains, “political power is the crucial factor” in language planning. The 1994 genocide was critical to the nation’s language policy. Since then, the RPF, which consists of returnees from countries with English
as one of their official languages, has held power. “English is the language of the victors” in Rwanda (Samuelson & Freedman 2010, p.194). Samuelson and Freedman (2010) explain that even though people living in foreign countries can criticise the Rwandan government for its language policy, those living in present Rwanda cannot. In reality, people who publicly oppose the policy can be punished (Samuelson & Freedman, 2010).

Additionally, there is a difference in educational circumstances. According to Samuelson and Freedman (2010), Kinyarwanda has attracted little attention, and powerful languages have been used in higher education and contexts of cultural, political, economic, and social significance. Only in the first three years of primary school, did Kinyarwanda use to be used as a language of instruction (McGreal, 2008), so it is clear that materials in this language were never developed for higher education. Rassool, Canvin, Heugh, and Mansoor (2007) also explain that since instruction was not given in Kinyarwanda beyond primary school, the language has not fully developed. On the other hand, materials in English for teaching/learning at any level are readily available. Developing materials in Kinyarwanda would cost a lot more than using readily available materials (cf. Holmes, 2013). In the case of Japan, teaching/learning materials in Japanese are fully developed through all levels of education. In this respect, there is no point in giving instruction in a foreign language in Japan. Nakamura explains that if English became an official language, education would have to be given in both Japanese and English from primary school onwards (Kojima, 2000). He argues that it is unnecessary and theoretically impossible in Japan.

In addition, the economic situation of Japan and Rwanda is completely different (IMD World Competitiveness Center, 2014), even though the proposed basis of introducing English as an official language relates to the economy both in Japan and Rwanda. According to Sauzier-Uchida (2008), developing countries in Asia and Africa that are aiming to become democratised often put more importance on reducing poverty than maintaining their identity.

According to Holmes (2013), in language planning, considering people’s attitudes toward the language is essential. Samuelson and Freedman (2010) assume that the Rwandan people agreed to support the government’s language policy, since it promised that they would experience economic advantages. On the other hand, it is not at all clear how many of the Japanese people are ready to accept English as an official language. It is evident that everybody hopes for the Japanese economy to improve, but not many people, especially those who do not encounter the English language in their daily lives, seem to relate this foreign language to their own economic prosperity. In his interview with Mainichi Shimbun, Suzuki claims that the view that Japanese people must all master English is a delusion (Shimokawa, 1999). As he argues, Japanese people will not have any trouble not knowing English as long as they live in Japan.

6. Conclusion

This paper has discussed the reasons why Japan did not make English an official language, by contrast with Rwanda. Although Japan and Rwanda share similar linguistic aspects, there are also major differences between these two countries.

First, in Rwanda, ethnic and political conflicts greatly impacted on English becoming an official language. Second, the educational context in Japan is dissimilar to that of Rwanda. Third, even though the economy is presented as one of the reasons for proposing English as an official language in Japan, the sever-
ity of economic problems differ from that of Rwanda. Finally, Japanese people are not ready to accept English as an official language.

The current study has only compared the language policies of Japan and Rwanda. Also, it remains unclear whether Rwanda’s language policy and planning will be successful in the future. Further investigation is needed on languages policies around the world, in addition to documenting the continuing language planning of Rwanda.

References


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