



Discourses of Identity

Language Learning, Teaching,
and Reclamation Perspectives in Japan

Edited by Martin Mielick
Ryuko Kubota · Luke Lawrence

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Discourses of Identity

“This book is a welcome addition to the literature on linguistic diversity in Japan, putting a solid nail into the coffin of the surprisingly persistent stereotype of Japan as a monolingual nation. Its multi-faceted examination of identity-related issues inherent in language learning, teaching and reclamation illuminates the true complexity of language issues in Japan today.”

—Nanette Gottlieb, *The University of Queensland, Australia, Emeritus Professor, School of Languages and Cultures*, nanette.gottlieb@uq.edu.au

“If, in 2022, anyone is still holding onto the myth of Japan as a homogeneous nation, this book will shatter that myth. But not only that, this book also illuminates the experiences of those who are trying to negotiate diverse identities and carve out a place for themselves in a nation that’s both rapidly changing and stubbornly resistant to change.”

—Yasuko Kanno, *Boston University, USA, Associate Professor of Language Education and Chair of the Department of Language and Literacy Education*, yakanno@bu.edu

“Diversity and identity are concepts that are absolutely central to any understanding of language and its use. This wide-ranging volume explores the implications this has for language education in Japan, a country often portrayed as culturally and linguistically homogenous. In doing so, the book offers an insightful and engaging look at the experiences and challenges involved in real people’s often complex relationships with language education.”

—Philip Seargeant, *The Open University, UK, Senior Lecturer in Applied Linguistics*, philip.seargeant@open.ac.uk

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Editors

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1

Introduction to Language Learning, Teaching, and Reclamation in Japan: Diversity, Inequalities, and Identities

Ryuko Kubota

Japan is a country typically described as racially, culturally, and linguistically homogenous. Yet, homogeneity must be understood in relative terms. Indeed, some nation states are more homogenous than others, but absolute homogeneity rarely exists anywhere in the world due to historical and contemporary realities of human mobility. Transnational and transregional human mobility throughout history have created contact zones (Pratt, 2008), in which people learn to use others' language(s) by necessity, by choice, through colonial impositions, or under educational policies. This indicates that there is a significant amount of diversity among languages learned as well as language users, learners, and teachers in Japan. There are also multiple purposes, reasons, motivations, and desires for engaging in linguistic development for ourselves and others, all of which contribute to shaping identities.

Yet, such diversity does not imply that all the elements—language, gender, race, ethnicity, experience, intentionality—that comprise the

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multiplicity of identities have an equal status in society. Moreover, when diversity is understood as a constellation of diverse groups separated by identity categories (e.g., women, men, Ainu, and Ryukyuan), an urge to characterize each group in a single unified term leads to a problem of understanding diversity as a collection of groups, each of which is defined in an essentialist way.

As an introduction to our book, I will lay out contextual information about diversity relevant to identities in language learning, teaching, and reclamation in Japan; examine power, ideologies, and inequalities that are intertwined with diversity; and provide a brief discussion on identities in language education. I write as a Japanese woman and a critical scholar in applied linguistics who grew up in Japan and moved to North America in my late 20s. My 40 years of professional activities, including teaching English and Japanese as foreign languages and conducting research on language education, inform my perspectives.

Diversity in Japan

Diversity observed in the social, cultural, linguistic, and demographic domains in Japan has been pointed out by a number of authors in sociology, education, and language studies (e.g., Befu, 2001; Gottlieb, 2005; Okano, 2021; Sugimoto, 2014). Ethnolinguistic diversity is especially relevant to the topics addressed in this volume.

Although the Japanese language is predominantly used in Japan, many variations exist according to geography, gender, register, genre, modality, and so on. In thinking about the linguistic diversity of Japanese, however, we should be cautious of essentialism. For instance, there is a common belief that the Japanese language is characterized by gendered linguistic expressions as well as different registers for politeness. These ideas tend to lead to the belief that there is a diametrical difference in linguistic identity between women and men or between people with different social statuses that are hierarchically ordered. However, sociolinguistic investigations of actual language use of Japanese speakers revealed more nuanced use of different registers and variants. In fact, the indexicality of gender and politeness is manifested in dynamic and fluid ways according to

different dialects, social contexts, social statuses, and positionalities as well as a combination of these elements (Okamoto & Shibamoto-Smith, 2016). There is no inherent connection, for instance, between being a woman and using feminine speech. It is important to beware of the lure of essentialism when understanding language and identity (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004).

One significant component of diversity in Japan is comprised by Indigenous populations. Indigenous peoples—Ainu and Ryukyans—together with their languages and cultures constitute minoritized segments in Japan. As Part II of this book presents (Chap. 5 by Ohara & Okuda, Chap. 6 by Tsagel'nik, Chap. 7 by Hammine, and Chap. 8 by Heinrich & Valsecchi), varieties of Ainu and Ryukyuan languages, cultures, and identities have been severely suppressed by the modern Japanese government. Yet, they have been revitalized and reclaimed through the efforts made by Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples (see also Heinrich, 2012; Heinrich & Ohara, 2019). Furthermore, although Indigenous identities have been severely suppressed and erased, they can be playfully appropriated, performing “coolness” in postmodern society (Maher, 2005).

Linguistic, ethnic, and cultural diversity in Japan is also observed among residents other than the prototypical Japanese (Otomo, 2019). They include: oldcomer ethnic groups who settled in Japan during the era of Imperial Japan (e.g., *zainichi* Koreans); newcomers, including Chinese returnees (repatriates of Japanese war orphans and remaining women in China—Kubota, 2013) and technical trainees (*ginō jissūsei*), or semi-skilled workers who have come since the 1990s; *Nikkeijin* (people of Japanese descent) as workers and their families mainly from South America; healthcare trainees under Economic Partnership Agreements (see Chap. 9 by Shima); international students (see Chap. 4 by He; Chap. 10 by Yonemoto; Chap. 11 by Kitade); and skilled foreign workers, who include native English-speaking teachers. Thus, even in rural communities, multiple languages, including English, Mandarin, Portuguese, Spanish, Tagalog, Thai, and Vietnamese, are spoken by diverse racialized and ethnic groups (Kubota & McKay, 2009).

The racial, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversity in Japan creates multiple contact zones involving diverse learners, teachers, and other

participants who strive to develop their linguistics skills. To take foreign language learning for example, though the dominant language to learn is English, other languages, including Mandarin, Korean, French, Spanish, and German, are also taught and learned. The contexts in which these foreign languages are learned vary from formal education (e.g., primary, secondary, and tertiary education) and nonformal education, including *juku* or private cram school, private language institutes providing in-person or online lessons of *eikaiwa* or English conversation (Hooper & Hashimoto, 2020), community classes, workplaces, and so on (Kubota, 2020). The contextual multiplicity signals the diversity of learners, teachers, as well as desires and purposes of learning, which are either institutionally required or individually initiated. As the chapters of this volume illustrate, much of foreign language learning in Japan takes place among Japanese students learning English (Chap. 2 by Mielick and Chap. 3 by Hooper). English language instruction is provided by Japanese teachers of English or native English-speaking teachers (NESTs) (Chap. 14 by Moore; Chap. 16 by Lowe; Chap. 17 by Lawrence; Chap. 19 by Nagashima). However, English language learning is also engaged by other diverse learners. For example, the popularity of English-medium instruction (EMI) has created a space where plurilingual international students construct and reconstruct their linguacultural identity in English and Japanese as additional languages, while providing communicative opportunities in other languages as well (Tsukada, 2013; Hashimoto, 2013; see also Chap. 11 by Kitade). Even outside of EMI programs, English is learned by not only Japanese students but also non-Japanese students in Japan (see an example of a White Russian student learning English in Chap. 4 by He). In addition, not all non-Japanese teachers of English are NESTs. Learning English from Filipino/a teachers online has become an attractive option among Japanese students (Tajima, 2018; see also Chap. 15 by Tajima). Furthermore, many of the NESTs working in Japan are learners of Japanese, navigating multilayered contact zones for identity negotiation (Chap. 14 by Moore).

Indeed, Japanese language teaching and learning in Japan involves multiple contact zones. Just as in English language education in Japan, Japanese language teaching and learning involves a range of contexts and participants. For instance, instruction takes place in primary and

secondary schools in many pockets of Japanese society mainly for children with overseas roots (e.g., children of *Nikkei* workers and foreign professionals), whereas many universities offer Japanese courses for international students seeking their degree (Chap. 10 by Yonemoto) or studying under short-term exchange programs. There are also healthcare and technical trainees learning Japanese in the form of on-the-job training (Chap. 9 by Shima). Some of them also learn Japanese in community settings from Japanese volunteer tutors (Chap. 14 by Moore). Furthermore, not only teachers but also prospective teachers or teacher trainees and their prospective teaching contexts are diverse (Chap. 12 by Iwasaki; Chap. 13 by Motobayashi).

One prominent yet often forgotten facet of language teaching and learning involves Indigenous languages and cultures. Although the two major language groups—Ainu and Ryukyuan—represent Indigenous languages in Japan, they are not monoliths. There are many varieties of these languages used in traditional communities. It is important to note that the familiar concept of modern language teaching and learning does not fit how Indigenous people try to gain their knowledge and skills in the language that they have lost for generations. The long-term oppression and assimilation along with the resultant erasure of Indigenous languages and cultures compel Indigenous people to regain their lost linguistic and cultural identity. As such, learning an Indigenous language is not for increasing socioeconomic opportunities or appreciating a foreign culture; rather, it is about reclaiming the Indigenous identity or rediscovering and regaining oneself as a bearer of Indigenous heritage. Its benefits include strengthening intergenerational connections and wellbeing of the family and community, revaluing cultural identity, and developing a sense of self-determination (McCarty, 2020). This indicates, as Part II of this volume demonstrate, that learning Indigenous languages does not share the same purpose, process, benefit, and symbolic meaning with learning English, Japanese, or other modern languages.

Power, Ideology, and Inequality within Diversity

The above overview of diversity in Japan certainly demystifies the common image of Japan as a homogeneous nation. However, it is important to recognize that the diverse groups of people or languages are not positioned with equal amounts of power in institutions and larger society.

Of all varieties of Japanese language, standardized Japanese based on a Tokyo dialect is the dominant language in contemporary Japan. Its dominance was established as part of the modernist project of building a linguistically and culturally unified nation, which involved the creation of *kokugo*, a written form of standardized language, and the imposition of the national language, *kokugo*, onto the users of Indigenous languages and regional dialects, as well as people in the colonized and occupied territories during the era of Imperial Japan (Gottlieb, 2005; Heinrich, 2012). This nation-building process was driven by the modernist ideology underlying the creation of a unified nation as an imagined community, which involves the establishment of standardized print language (Anderson, 2006). However, there is resistance. As seen in the chapters of Part II on Indigenous language reclamation in this volume, Indigenous people have begun to push back the state ideology that has long suppressed their languages to carve out space for legitimating their lost identities.

The hegemony of standardized Japanese creates a power hierarchy not only among diverse varieties of Japanese or Indigenous languages but also between native speakers of Japanese and nonnative speakers of Japanese or between heritage learners of Japanese and nonheritage learners of Japanese. For instance, the image of *Nikkei* Japanese language learners in South America is constructed closer to Japaneseness than that of non-*Nikkei* Japanese learners (see Chap. 13 by Motobayashi). This certainly involves an undertone of racial distinctions in language learning, resonating with raciolinguistic ideology, whereby one's perceived racial background affects listeners' reaction to linguistic performance (Flores & Rosa, 2015). I will discuss this more later.

With regard to foreign language education in Japan, the most popular language to learn is English, reflecting its global status (Kubota, 2019; Seargeant, 2011). However, not all Englishes or English speakers are equal (Tupas, 2015); there are power disparities between the standardized forms of English and other varieties and between native speakers and nonnative speakers. Teachers of English—native speakers or nonnative speakers—navigate these power differentials (Chap. 19 by Nagashima). The same belief about the superiority of native speakers predominates the teaching and learning of Japanese as a second language in Japan as well. Recently, there is a social movement to narrow the power differential between native and nonnative speakers of Japanese in local communities by using *yasashii nihongo* [simplified Japanese] especially during natural disasters or other emergency situations (Hashimoto, 2018). Despite its good intention of leveling linguistic power relations, using the modified version of Japanese does not work to disrupt the hegemony of the standardized Japanese in any fundamental way, and instead it can even accentuate the foreignness of nonnative speakers, causing their alienation (see Chap. 12 by Iwasaki).

Unequal relations of power between diverse language users are not only caused by linguistic difference; speakers' racial backgrounds intersect with their linguistic profiles and reproduce raciolinguistic ideologies (Flores & Rosa, 2015). In the case of English, speakers who are viewed as competent and thus superior are White people, whereas in the case of Japanese, those who are viewed as competent speakers of Japanese typically display the stereotypical phenotype of the Japanese. People who deviate from these bodily images are made linguistically illegitimate and marginalized, whereas those who are aligned with the raciolinguistic stereotype are privileged (Kang & Rubin, 2009; Rivers & Ross, 2013; see also Chap. 4 by He; Chap. 15 by Tajima). Moreover, other identity categories, including gender, class, and sexuality, intersect with each other and form a complex web of power for diverse language users (see Chap. 14 by Moore).

Research on Identities in Language Learning, Teaching, and Reclamation

Research on identity in language education has been conducted in many contexts in various geographical locations (e.g., Anya, 2017; Appleby, 2014; Barkhuizen, 2017; Higgins, 2011; Kamada, 2010; Kanno, 2003, 2008; Nagamoto, 2016; Nakane et al., 2015; Norton, 2013; Park, 2017; Simon-Maeda, 2011; Stanley, 2013; Tajima, 2018). These investigations have revealed that constructions of identity are not only bound up with common identity markers, such as race, gender, and class, but they are also intrinsically connected with language and are contextually manifested (Norton & De Costa, 2018).

In the field of language studies, the identity of language learners and teachers in general has largely been investigated through a postmodern/poststructuralist lens, underscoring its multiple, fluid, hybrid, and discursively constructed nature (Weedon, 1997). This lens provides scholars with anti-essentialist understanding of language, culture, and identity, serving as a critical tool for analyzing, interpreting, and reporting the nature of identity. In Japan, the essentialist conceptualization of Japaneseness or *nihonjinron*, as an ideology that emphasizes the uniqueness of Japanese language, culture, and people, may influence how learners or teachers construct identities of the Self and the Other (Befu, 2001; Chap. 2 by Mielick; Chap. 19 by Nagashima). Moreover, its essentialist ideology functions as an assimilation force against Indigenous peoples, compelling them to devalue their ancestral language and culture as inferior to Japaneseness (see Part II: Chap. 5 by Ohara & Okuda, Chap. 6 by Tsagel'nik, Chap. 7 by Hammine, and Chap. 8 by Heinrich & Valsecchi).

The essentialist understanding of language and culture is incompatible with the increased diversity as seen in linguistic forms and practices, which informs how learner or teacher identity is shaped within multilingual and plurilingual conditions and consciousness (Rubdy & Alsagoff, 2013; Kramsch, 2009). Yet, the scholarly trend toward illuminating the multi/plural turn is at odds with the neoliberal emphasis on learning English only and measuring linguistic ability via standardized tests, posing a tension between fluidity and fixity (Jaspers & Madsen, 2019;

Kubota, 2016). Thus, more recently, increased scholarly attention has been paid to the role of the political economy, neoliberal ideologies, and social class in language teaching, learning, and use (Block, 2014; Block et al., 2012). Under the neoliberal ideology that emphasizes the importance of developing marketable skills with self-effort, acquiring English language competence is deemed essential for socioeconomic mobility, constructing the identity of the neoliberal self. Paradoxically, neoliberalism also capitalizes on the notion of diversity which is supposed to enhance economic profit in the free market economy, creating tensions for identity management. For example, in a study on Korean workers in multinational corporations in Singapore, Park (2020) demonstrated a contradiction of the neoliberal discourse of diversity management that values the workers' unique linguacultural identity on the one hand, and imposes a monolingual English-dominant identity of being assertive on the other. Park's study as well as others raise questions of how identity is shaped and reshaped by the interface between language policies, ideologies, economy, and material conditions (see Chap. 15 by Tajima).

While the neoliberal ideology drives the nation to enhance English language teaching and learning for economic success, not all language learners are oriented toward the instrumental purpose for learning English. Learning a language in fact shapes nonpragmatic identities that involve various kinds of personal desires and aspirations (Kubota, 2011; see Chap. 10 by Yonemoto). This also indicates how emotions are involved in the shaping of identity in language education. Teachers' emotional encounters and management, for instance, are embedded in social, contextual, and relational specificities and linked to their professional wellbeing and identities (Benesch, 2012; Gkonou et al., 2020; see Chap. 17 by Lawrence, Chap. 18 by Morris).

In contrast to these individual experiences of desires and emotions, reclaiming collective identity is foregrounded in reclaiming Indigenous languages from decolonizing perspectives. It necessitates community mobilization, healing, and transformation, as discussed earlier (Smith, 2021; Wyman et al., 2014). In this context, language learning is a part of a larger community endeavor to recover the lost Indigenous identity which integrates collective linguistic identity with land, history, and culture (see Part II: Chap. 5 by Ohara & Okuda, Chap. 6 by Tsagel'nik, Chap. 7 by Hammime, and Chap. 8 by Heinrich & Valsecchi).

Issues of identity in language teaching and learning in Japan can be investigated against these backdrops. Reflecting globalization, English is the predominant language to learn, offering many contact zones in which the identity of teachers and learners are often negotiated with native/non-native speakerness and cultural identity. Japanese educational initiatives in globalization have both solidified and obscured national, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic borders and identities (Doerr, 2020). Yet, participants in language education are positioned in unequal relations of power that require identity negotiation. Furthermore, the contexts of teaching and learning are multiple, providing multiple sites for identity (re)formation and negotiation.

About This Book

Focusing on language learning, teaching, and reclaiming in Japan, this book presents studies that offer multiple manifestations, workings, and negotiations of identity observed in diverse contexts involving diverse people. It focuses on multiple dimensions of identity in Japan as they intersect, collide, or are reshaped, illuminating linguistic, cultural, and human diversity and complexity as manifested in language education. The book brings together Japanese and non-Japanese scholars to investigate a diverse range of contemporary issues related to identities constructed within this context. While some identities are performed by human actors, such as teachers, learners, and reclaimers, other identities are discursively (re)constructed and signify teachers and learners as the Other. The identities of the authors too, presented as researcher positionalities in each chapter, are woven into their data analysis, providing nuanced understandings of identities. Languages addressed in this book range from English learned and taught by diverse participants in various settings, to Japanese learned as a second, foreign, or heritage language by speakers of other languages, and to Indigenous languages reclaimed by community members. By presenting such diverse contexts, languages, actors, and purposes, issues of identity in Japan shed light on multiple facets of linguistic practices, beliefs, ideologies, and tensions in a distinct way.

The book is divided into four parts: English language learner identity, Indigenous language reclamation and identity, Japanese language learner identity, and English language teacher identity. Chapters present original qualitative research and expand our understandings of facets of identities as evident in language education in the Japanese context and likely in other contexts as well. By questioning assumptions and investigating the heretofore under-researched, this volume adds nuance and complexity to what is often seen as a homogenous society and gives greater insight and understandings for students and scholars both in Japan and around the world.

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Part I

English Language Learner Identity



2

English Language Learners' Discursive Constructions of National and Global Identities in the Japanese University Context

Martin Mielick

National identity in Japan has been a strong foundation for its culture and traditional underpinnings at first glance (Gottlieb, 2005), yet concepts of national identity often ignore the diversity of identity and plurilingual conditions that can be found in modern Japanese society (Befu, 2001). In particular, one major influence to consider is the role of globalization in English language teaching in Japan and how this may be affecting language learners' identities and ideological perceptions of 'Otherness' (Said, 1978). According to Kubota (2017, p. 288), "the neoliberal promotion of English is complemented by neoconservative emphasis on national identity," which in turn emboldens *nihonjinron* thesis claims, a discourse that emphasizes Japanese 'uniqueness.' But how is this phenomenon externally represented in English language learners' discourses in Japanese universities and what role does learning English play in shaping students' identities?

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