

This is a selection from my Master's thesis on the ideology espoused in Japanese-language YouTube comments on videos containing the usage of Japanese dialects. The sections below explain the sociopolitical and historical context of the contemporary Japanese language.

disproportionate poverty in the present day.

I was interested to see if similar trends would appear in the discourse surrounding the explosive valorization and commodification of Japanese regional dialects, which are largely associated with the ethnic majority but can have similar associations with present-day poverty and a pre-modern idyllic rural past. This also serves my interest in studying the folklorization of languages and dialects around the world, particularly endangered ones, and the negative material consequences it can often have.

2. Literature Review

I begin this literature review by reviewing the sociopolitical and linguistic background of the Japanese context. I review the literature on salient social issues in Japan and current sociolinguistic work on Japanese dialects. I continue by describing the theories of Standard Language Ideology and folklorization that I use to place the data in a macro-social context. Finally, I conclude by reviewing the literature on enregisterment and indexicality, as well as the discourse analytic theory of linguistic performance, which I use to help determine how specific linguistic features and performances become salient at the micro-social level.

2.1. Japanese Sociopolitical Context

In this section, I will describe the current scholarship on the status of race, diversity, and multiculturalism in Japan, which provides the social context for my analysis.

2.1.1. Imperial History

While an ideologically-grounded belief in a long imperial history is widespread within and outside Japan, the history of the country as a culturally and politically unified nation with a central government can only be traced back to the 1868 Meiji Restoration (Ramsey 2004, Shin 2010, Okamura 2016). I discuss the fragmented feudal pre-Meiji political structure in section 2.2. The rapid unification of

the country and subsequent conquest of surrounding Southeast Asian nations was aided by the construction of an imperial ideology of unity. This led to a conflation of race, language, and nationality and a valorization of national unity that persist to the present, albeit in significantly modified form.

2.1.2. Race, Xenophobia, and Diversity

Contemporary English-language scholarship on race and ethnic identity in Japan is conflicted. It is undeniable that Japan is relatively lacking in ethnic diversity, and the concept of foreignness itself carries substantial weight in defining what “Japaneseness” is. I will refer to the high salience of foreignness as a concept and a social category throughout my analysis.

Those without Japanese blood cannot become Japanese citizens, resulting in a substantial and largely invisible population of illegal immigrants and so-called “foreign residents”. “Foreign residents” such as the Zainichi Koreans, who constitute about 1% of the country’s population, are treated as foreigners even by sympathetic anti-racists due to their lack of citizenship, even though many of their families have lived in Japan for over 100 years. Park (2017) explains how this allows racism to be problematically passed off as ‘xenophobia’, essentially placing racism (and racial diversity) firmly outside of the Japanese context.

The Japanese national census does not record ethnicity, making it difficult to estimate the exact demographic proportions, but I estimate that approximately 95% of the population belong to the *Wajin* ethnic majority. The total population of the country is about 127,000,000 (Statistics Bureau 2016); of those there are 1.5-2 million Ryūkyūans (Okinawans), 1 million Koreans, 700,000 Chinese, and about 500,000 foreign residents from other countries (Ministry of Justice 2017). The *burakumin*, the descendants of members of the untouchable caste of the feudal caste system, must also be considered, as they are technically *Wajin* but have been severely discriminated against for centuries. They number somewhere between 2 and 4 million people (Davis 2002: 18). Finally, there are about 500,000 *Nikkei* repatriates, people with Japanese blood who were repatriated from other Asian countries and Latin America and granted citizenship in the 1980s and 90s as part of a scheme to increase the pool of cheap

domestic labor (Shin 2010). An estimate that includes *burakumin* and *Nikkei* as racialized minorities would yield numbers of about 6,500,000 to 9,000,000 non-*Wajin*, or about 5 to 7% of the country's population.

Analysis of Japanese racial issues is further complicated by the academic trend called *nihonjinron* 'theories of Japaneseness', the tendency to promote extreme views of Japanese uniqueness and exceptionalism, which dominated most academic work on Japan between 1945 and 1990. Since Shepard's (1991) call to action, numerous scholars across many academic fields have mobilized against it (Kubota 1999, Lie 2001, Ishiwata 2011) by pointing out Japan's great internal (non-ethnic, para-ethnic, Indigenous) diversity and the ongoing issues with racism against its minorities.

This has preceded to the point where opposing *nihonjinron* in English-language academic literature has become a cliché. Burgess (2008) points out that *nihonjinron* has been thoroughly discredited in Japanese-language academia since the early 1990s and largely collapsed out of popular culture during the Lost Decade, the 1990s economic depression, noting that even right-wing Japanese politicians now make appeals to diversity as a positive Japanese trait. Iwabuchi & Takezawa (2015:1) further note that 'multiculturalism' entered Japanese public discourse as early as 1995, and Shin (2010: 328) and Shibuichi (2015: 719) argue that the homogenous Japanese self-image that was dominant from around 1945-1990 was largely a reaction to the failure of Imperial Japan's pan-Asian ideology.

It is my aim to examine the new post-*nihonjinron* understandings of Japanese diversity using sociolinguistic analysis of online commentary, which is currently a gap in the English-language literature.

2.2. Japanese Language History

The Japanese feudal period, which lasted from approximately 1592 to 1868 CE, was marked by the partitioning of Japan into approximately 200 feudal kingdoms. Due to the strict caste system only samurai were permitted to travel between kingdoms, and there is widespread agreement that this caused a major fracturing of the already diverse Japanese language into numerous mutually unintelligible dialects (Maher & Yashiro 1995, Carroll 2001: 8, Ramsey 2004: 86, Lee 2010).

After the unification of the country, central administrators largely set the language problem to the side until the linguist Kazutoshi Ueda, inspired by his study of France and Germany, proposed the creation of a *kokugo* ‘national language’ in 1894, to be based off the upper-class Edo (Tokyo) dialect (Ramsey 2004: 96).

Official policy from the early 1900s onwards aimed at the promotion of *hyōjungo* ‘standard language’, and the eradication of dialects through compulsory education. This succeeded in instilling a deep sense of shame in and severe discrimination against dialect users (Heinrich 2004, Carroll 2001). The school system was the primary instrument for accomplishing this, and there is widespread documentation of the “dialect tag”, where students caught using dialect were forced to wear a sign until they caught another student using dialect and could pass it off to them (Carroll 2001: 9, Heinrich 2004: 7, Ramsey 2004: 99). Physical abuse and expulsion from school are also documented as methods of coercion.

These policies largely failed at spreading proficiency in *hyōjungo*, and acquisition of standard Japanese floundered until men drafted into the army during World War II were forced to use it as a *lingua franca*. However, dialects continued to be widely spoken across the country until economic migration in the 1950s postwar era forced migrants to suppress their dialects (Carroll 2001).

However, beginning around the 1980s, just at the point where most dialects were on the verge of dying out, interest in and appreciation for dialects surged. From 1989 onwards Japan’s national educational guidelines advised teaching children to respect dialects, learn where they differ from *hyōjungo*, and code-switch depending on the situation (Carroll 2001: 12).

The present day is now considered to be a “dialect boom” era where many dialects are highly valorized and commercialized. Certain dialects, such as the Kansai-ben¹ spoken in the southwestern Kansai region, are evaluated more positively on average than Tokyo-ben or *hyōjungo*. Certain Kansai-ben features have permeated the speech of young Japanese speakers across the country, a trend which

¹Japanese dialects are most commonly referred to in the format REGION-*ben*, with *ben* meaning ‘dialect’.

Matsubara (2008) attributes to the use of Kansai-ben in the 1990s by popular celebrities. Stylistic usage of dialect features by Tokyo youth was documented as early as Inoue (1986).

2.3. Present-Day Variation

While it is no longer promoted with the same severity, Japan continues to use *hyōjungo* as its standard language. Since the postwar era the national government has tended to promote *kyōtsūgo* 'common language' instead, which is supposed to refer to the 'common vernacular' rather than the idealized *hyōjungo* (Carroll 2001: 21). In practice there is little difference between the two, and *hyōjungo* is commenters' preferred term in my data in most contexts.

While the dialect boom era has led to an increase in the usage of local dialects across domains, including broadcast media, print, education, and the Internet, *hyōjungo* still dominates all of these by far. Ramsey (2004: 103) estimates that 100% of Japan's population can at least understand it in the present day, noting that as early as 1949 the dialectologist Takeshi Sibata could find only one person who required an interpreter to be interviewed in *hyōjungo*, an eighty-year old woman on the isolated island of Hachijō.

In the following sections, I will give an overview of the descriptive and sociolinguistic literature on the six specific dialects I have selected and explain my rationale.