

An Investigation into Japanese Systems, Origins, and Potential Threats

The Japanese language is one of significant popularity among language learners across the world. According to a report from Duolingo, one of the most widely used language learning sites in the world, Japanese has recently risen above Italian to become the 5th most popular language world-wide, with even higher rankings within individual nations such as China, Vietnam, and Japan itself (Blanco, 2023). The numerous complexities hidden within even the most fundamental written, spoken, and sociolinguistic aspects of the language result in Japan being ranked the 3rd most difficult language to learn for English speakers next to Mandarin and Arabic and followed by Korean and Hindi (World Atlas, 2017). Despite these challenges, Japan continues to increase in popularity among foreigners and for a rather unexpected reason: enjoyment (Blanco, 2023). While polls show that other prominent languages such as English and Spanish are studied for reasons relating to academics and the wish to connect with other people, similar data reveals the main motivation behind foreigners' efforts to learn Japanese resides almost entirely in the enjoyment factor, likely relating to people seeking out the ability to better take part in certain aspects of Japanese culture including watching Anime (Japanese animation) and reading Manga (Japanese comics) (Blanco, 2023).

Among the influx of those fascinated by Japanese language and culture, concerns regarding the health of the Japanese language over the long term persist as researchers are finding troubling signs that the Japanese language may be in danger of falling out of common use among progressing pressure to globalize (Margolis, 2020). This shifting balance between the maintenance of traditional Japanese culture and the nation's increased involvement within global markets is of great importance to those, such as myself, who seek to travel to Japan and possibly work in a position that would allow for the opportunity to interact with Japanese companies and

individuals. Having a solid understanding of current international relations and intranational societal affairs is not only beneficial in successful assimilation into a new environment but provides a strong base off of which natives and foreigners alike can work together to better protect cultural traditions as we move toward what appears to be a promising, more globalized future. Among the many culturally significant pieces of Japanese society that could be lost, the most apparent that is currently viewed by some to be in danger is the Japanese language, a complex and historically rich system that will be broken down into just a few of its main components in the coming sections.

The Japanese Writing System

One of the most unique features of Japanese is the writing system. Japanese is the only language in the world that utilizes all three of the main writing systems into which modern languages can be categorized: alphabetic, syllabic, logographic (Britannica, n.d.). All three systems are derived from the Chinese writing system as Japan had no written language prior to the introduction of Chinese characters. It was only after the native people of Japan adopted this new writing system that the alterations of symbols and division of alphabets took place.

Hiragana

Hiragana is the first of the three modern Japanese alphabets and consists of 46 basic characters, known as Kana, that can be used independently or combined with others to create more unique sound structures. The alphabet can be presented using a grid with one axis containing the five vowel sounds present within the language and the other axis containing all the possible consonants that can be placed before each of the vowels, each combination possessing its own unique pronunciation and symbol (Macedo, 2022). The vowel symbols along

with a couple others fall under the alphabetical writing system while all other sounds are considered syllabic.

Hiragana can be considered the base of the Japanese language and is generally the first system taught to Japanese children and foreign learners alike. This writing system was originally developed in the ninth century as a simplified version of entire Chinese characters written in *sōsho*, a style of calligraphy that could be written with a few continuous strokes (Bullock, 1994). It was far more prominent among women than men and was generally used for informal communication. Its elegant, rounded letters make it comparable to the cursive writing style present within English. Hiragana is now used consistently by all Japanese speakers and serves specific purposes within the language. Hiragana is used when writing native Japanese words or names and when displaying the phonetic pronunciations of Kanjis (logographic characters borrowed from Chinese) in the form of furigana (a term referring Kanjis represented through hiragana characters) (Bullock, 1994). Hiragana also functions as grammatical particles and can be used to alter Kanji characters.

Katakana

Katakana is identical to hiragana in pronunciation. It is comprised of the same vowels, consonants, and sound combinations as the hiragana alphabet and can be displayed using the same type of chart in which consonants are aligned with the vowels to create all the phonetic sounds within the Japanese language. Katakana derives from a slightly different source called *kunten*, a type of Chinese character created for the Japanese people to facilitate the reading of Chinese texts (Bullock, 1994). Katakana symbols are not adaptations of entire characters as hiragana symbols are, but instead fragments of larger, more complex geometric structures

(Bullock, 1994). Katakana is considerably less flowy, resembling the English print style (as opposed to cursive) of writing in the way that it has a sharper appearance.

Like Hiragana, Katakana serves certain purposes within the Japanese language. One of the main uses of Katakana is for loan words, words adopted into the Japanese language from other languages such as English, Russian, and Portuguese (Macedo, 2022). Personal names, country names, and certain technological terms are common loan words in the Japanese language and the Katakana alphabet does its best to match the foreign sounds with the most suitable counterparts within the Japanese sound system. Katakana also serves as onomatopoeias and can be used to place emphasis on native terms (Macedo, 2022). Such emphasis is commonly seen on items such as signs and advertisements within public areas of Japan.

Kanji

The Kanji alphabet is the third alphabet found within Japanese and is commonly considered one of the most difficult aspects of Japanese due to the sheer number of symbols one must memorize in order to read basic texts such as newspapers. While the Japanese Ministry of Education has only deemed 2,136 Kanji characters “essential,” tens of thousands of Kanjis exist in total (Sacacas, n.d.). The continued usage of Kanji is one piece of Japanese that differs from many other Asian languages that have come to retire their logographic writing styles, an example being Korea’s complete transition to using Hangul, the Korean alphabet, as opposed to Hanja, Korean characters of Chinese origin that are no longer commonly used.

The Kanji characters were adopted from Chinese in the 5th century but did not perfectly align with the grammatical structures of existing Japanese, so while Kanjis became a fundamental piece of the language, they are used in a way that somewhat differs from that of that of their mandarin ancestors (Britannica , n.d.). In both Japanese and Chinese, Kanjis can

represent a wide variety of ideas ranging from nouns to verbs to adjectives (Sacacas, n.d.). The difference lies in that within Japanese, Kanjis do not make up the entire text, but are rather embedded into sentences with other words formed using the Hiragana and Katakana alphabets. It is moderately comparable to a situation in which a person speaking English replaces all of the nouns in a text with the appropriate emojis, still conveying the same ideas, but through the simultaneous usage of two different visual communication methods. Aside from the relative equivalences that can be drawn between the use of Kanjis and emojis, emojis are merely a trivial embellishment while Kanjis serve a crucial role within Japanese. While it is true that every word in the Japanese language can theoretically be written in Hiragana, texts as simple as children's picture books would be almost completely unintelligible (Sacacas, n.d.). The reason for this issue lies in the structure of Japanese sentences. Written Japanese does not contain any spacing between each word, so without Kanjis to break up each building block of the sentence, one would have a very hard time deciphering where one word ends and where the next begins (Sacacas, n.d.). Japanese speakers would face their own version of the saying "this is all Greek to me" if presented with nothing more than a string of appearingly random and unrelated symbols. Kanjis also facilitate the creation of new terms as the paring of multiple Kanjis, like the combining of multiple English words, can result in compound words that can then express new ideas (Britannica , n.d.). Overall, despite the struggle faced by all those who must learn Kanji, they remain one of the most undeniably necessary portions of the language.

Japanese Origins and Development

Language Roots

Japanese is considered one of the largest language isolates in the world, meaning there are no known relatives to which Japanese can be traced back. While the writing system

originated from that of Chinese, the language is unique and many hypotheses regarding the origins of the Japanese language have been progressed in recent years, the predominant one proposing that Japanese is related to Korean (Shibatani, 2023). The Japanese-Korean theory suggest that around 300 BCE, Yayoi culture was brought from the Asian continent to Japan, resulting in the spread of not only iron and bronze tools and rice agriculture, but also the language spoken in southern Korea at the time. Due to the limited number of people who migrated from Korea to Japan, the existing languages of Japan remained, but were altered by the introduction of the new lexical forms (Shibatani, 2023).

From this point, an argument arises: Did Korean have enough influence to justify drawing a genetic relationship between Japanese and Korean. Some believe this connection is significant and that Japanese can, therefore, be considered an offspring of Korean (Shibatani, 2023). Others argue that while the Korean language may have played a defining role in the way in which certain aspects of the Japanese language developed, such as the grammatical structures, the language spoken by the Japanese did not derive from this source and, therefore, can still be classified as a language isolate (Shibatani, 2023). Aside from the ongoing debate within the community who believe this is how the Japanese language came to be, there are many who do not agree with this theory and continue to explore other possibilities.

Standard Japanese

Japanese used to take on many forms, far more than what currently exists within modern Japan. One writing style that is no longer in common use is Hentaigana, directly translating to “variant kana” (Science Language Japan, 1994). This is a writing style in which the Hiragana characters are written in varying forms and, while this style was once as common as typical

Kana, it has since been standardized out of practice and the only locations one might find this type of writing nowadays is on store signs or within poems (Science Language Japan, 1994).

The efforts that put this type of writing out of use began in the early 1900s, during the Meiji period (Bernier, 2021). This period lasted from 1868 to 1912 and came to be known as the period of progress and modernization due to Japan's old authorities being overthrown and new leadership, seeking radical reform, taking their place (Squires, 2022). One of the major changes implemented by the new government was the establishment of a standardized Japanese language. The language appointed as the standard was the dialect spoken in Tokyo, which has come to be known as Standard Japanese and is now spoken by 99% of the population. In addition to this change, in 1903, the government released a Japanese textbook to schools as an effort to progress the transition to this new and much improved system (Bernier, 2021).

Okinawan Dialect

Few Japanese dialects, other than the standardized Tokyo dialect, still remain in use, the largest of which is known as Okinawan and is spoken in the Okinawa Prefecture. Limited to the south of Okinawa Island and only a few Islands in close proximity, the language is only spoken by around 980,000 people. This dialect is primarily spoken among older generations and most speakers speak Standard Japanese in addition to this unique form (Omniglot, n.d.).

Okinawan branched from the same origin as Standard Japanese but, over time, developed into a separate form entirely, unable to be understood by speakers of Standard Japanese. The language uses the same Chinese derived writing systems including Hiragana, Katakana, and Kanji, but there are many differences that lie within the language systems including spellings, grammar, and the incorporation of the Latin alphabet, meaning that this dialect utilizes a total of four alphabets within its writing system (Omniglot, n.d.). The dialect also differs in that it has a

much more complicated honorific system than standard Japanese, a testament to the cultural practices of the people who speak this dialect. While the standardization that took place during the Meiji period pushed this dialect into near extinction, the reduction in the number of speakers of this dialect began long before, in the 1870s, when the Ryukyu islands were annexed by Japan and teaching of this dialect was discouraged. Since 1945, the locals have been working to regain their language, although it is only colloquial and does not have a standardized written form (Omniglot, n.d.).

Threats to Japanese Language Amidst Globalization Efforts

Japan's Economic Miracle and Downturn

The term economic miracle is used within economics to refer to a period of significant and unexpected economic growth. Many nations have experienced economic miracles and Japan's came between 1945 and 1991. Just following their complete surrender during WW II, Japan's economy flourished despite the nation having endured severe losses in the war, including up to 3.1 million lives and 56 billion USD (Berkley Economic Review, 2023). The shockingly abrupt improvement can be attributed to a few main factors, two of which are their adoption of modern technology and increased international trade. Efforts on the part of the government also helped Japanese companies grow rapidly by creating easy access to "cheap money" by keeping interest rates low so that companies could borrow and banks could loan far more money they should have been able to. The government rewarded faster-growing companies with lower tax rates to incentivize ambitious and aggressive business development efforts (Berkley Economic Review, 2023). These tactics worked well for many years and pushed Japan to develop one of the largest and most independent economies in the world.

Amidst all the effort on the part of the Japanese government to help businesses grow was an incredible amount of money being spent on trying to keep struggling companies afloat. “Zombie Companies” is a term that is used to refer to companies that are not capable of surviving without the assistance of outside support (Frick, 2022). These types of companies often fail so poorly they are not even able to pay the interest on their debts, let alone the debts themselves. While these types of companies are not limited to Japan, Japan’s zombie companies have become relatively well known due to the sheer number of them and their significant impact on Japan’s economy. As opposed to admitting to creditors that the debts would never be repaid, the Japanese government and banking industry propped up these companies, resulting in economic downturn (Frick, 2022). The concentration of failing companies, which inhibited the ability of new and promising companies to enter the market, along with other factors such as Japan’s ever worsening birth rates and the notorious “lost generation” have resulted in a domino effect, each issue building upon the last and sparking another. The associations between this issue and Japan have become so strong that the term “Japanification” was recently coined to describe a “permanent state of sluggish growth” (Glosserman, 2020). The presence of this issue within Japan despite notable quantities of such types of companies in Korea and across Europe displays the degree to which Japan has become known for their sudden and unprecedented economic shifts.

Japan’s Poor English Rates

Across many investigations and studies, Japan has consistently proven their English skills to be far less advanced in comparison to other nations. According to data collected from 2.1 million people worldwide in 2022 by EF Education First, a Swiss international education company, Japan ranked poorly with a score equating to “low proficiency” among 112 non-

English speaking nations that were studied. Singapore came in second place to the Netherlands and of the other Asian nations included, the Philippines came next followed by Malaysia, Hong Kong, South Korea, China, and Japan (Nippon, 2022). While at face value, these results may indicate a lack of effort, there has been much stress placed upon improving English proficiency within the Japanese school system. The government has allocated great amounts to the funding to projects such as the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) program, but these efforts have resulted in limited success (Newman, 2020). Through these challenges, Japan continues to seek improvement, but it may be the case that increased funding is not what is necessary to achieve the desired results.

One aspect of Japanese education that could likely be heavily influencing English proficiency rates is the practice of teaching to pass exams rather than teaching to create understanding. Some individuals report having undergone years of English courses through middle school, high school, and university, and still coming out the other end not speaking any English (Margolis, 2020). Japanese teachers blame faulty teaching methods for the issue, saying that classes entirely based in memorization are the standard preparation for university entrance exams despite the boring and dysfunctional approach leaving the students with little to no understanding of the material. Fear of being wrong, a common trait among Japanese students, may also play a role as many students actively avoid taking part in class activities to avoid the stigma that surrounds making mistakes in front of peers. On another note, some students may not see the point in learning English as it is not considered a necessary skill within Japanese society (Margolis, 2020). While the reasons vary from person to person and increased educational funding is never a bad idea, it is likely this struggle will not soon be diminished without significant educational and possibly social reform.

Predictions Regarding Japan's Future

Despite major expansion following the war, Japan remains a very exclusive society, one that strongly values homogeneity and tradition. While these items are not innately harmful, Japan has been feeling some of the negative effects of their cultural tendencies. Flexibility and collaboration are largely considered important within work environments as they help maintain a healthy and functional atmosphere (Warner, 2011). Due to the high-stress, demanding work environments and strict hierarchical systems present across all industries and sectors of Japan, flexibility and collaboration are made nearly impossible. Japan's lack of creativity and reluctance to adopt modern, US-style management systems is inhibiting their ability to compete in the markets they once dominated (Warner, 2011). This issue, coupled with an aging population and scarcity of incoming workers, has forced Japan to begin accepting more and more foreigners through new Visa programs for the purpose of supporting their damaged economy. While at least half of Japanese people report being in favor of accepting more foreigners, such steps must be made incrementally so as not to disrupt or overwhelm the people and culture (Akashi, 2014).

The need for Japan to further expand into international markets to continue their economic growth has not gone unnoticed by Japanese officials and business leaders. Part of the reason such valiant efforts have been made to increase English proficiency is because it has been widely recognized and accepted that the path to an economic resurrection lies within the Japanese peoples' ability to speak English (Newman, 2020). The government has attempted to improve Japan's international connections through investing great amounts in universities that build and expand exchange programs and offer classes in English (Rose & McKinley, 2018). This effort to help students engage in international experiences derives from the belief that

“internationalization” and strong English skills are necessary when attempting to compete with other nations and in raising future Japanese leaders.

Societal aspects also play a role in the incentivization of learning English in that English is commonly viewed as a measure of intelligence and education, gifting the user a level of perceived prestige and status (Margolis, 2020). English and certain aspects of western culture have come to be considered so desirable that in public areas of Japan, almost all signage, advertisements, menus, and other visual language forms are written entirely in English and the Japanese people would be severely disadvantaged if they had no understanding of the Roman alphabet (Backhaus, 2007). This eliminative type of voluntary integration of English within Japanese society provides reason to think the Japanese people might be leaning toward the incorporation of English even without the government’s efforts to improve competitiveness (Backhaus, 2007). The appeal of English has also leaked into even the most quintessential pieces of Japanese culture such as anime, in which the inclusion of English is becoming increasingly more common (Rahardjo, 2021). These occurrences are only the beginning of what could possibly be the adoption of English as a common language.

The government-guided shift toward a greater English-speaking population, combined with natural societal progression, leads some to believe that, despite English rates among Japanese currently remaining low, Japan may find itself developing into an English-dominated nation. This not only poses a threat to the Japanese language, possibly pushing Japanese into the endangered category in the far future, but also to traditional Japanese culture that could potentially be washed away amidst the powerful waves of westernization. Japan currently faces the challenge of keeping the balance between engaging in enough globalization to salvage their economy, but not so much that they lose everything they for so long stayed isolated to protect.

Conclusion

Japanese is a language full of unique complexities that set it apart greatly from all other modern languages. Deeply rooted within this language are ties to its origin, historical development, and traditional Japanese culture, connections that become clear when taking a deep look into their speaking and writing patterns. The strenuous efforts of the Japanese people to keep their home and way of life shielded from the outside world has long since served as their main form of protection against the loss of culture that commonly occurs when Western practices and standards are introduced to a society. The Japanese government's hesitancy to open the nation is warranted and made all the more understandable when looking at nearby nations such as Singapore, whose government must constantly work to defend the Malay language and heritage among English's growing popularity (World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples, n.d.). This is a topic all non-English nations must recognize when considering taking steps to globalize, as English has proven time and time again its remarkable ability to deem other languages obscure. Without careful navigation through the tenuous waters of international affairs, the Japanese language and its culture may one day cease to exist as it is known today.

This issue is of particular importance to the Japanese government, who the Japanese people look to for safety and security within a changing world that seldom provides either. The Japanese people themselves should also be aware of the changing currents as it is largely up to them to keep their culture alive through the passing down of traditions to their shrinking youth population. However, while protectionist measures should be implemented by the government and people alike, completely pulling away from the outside world could result in different yet equally disastrous outcomes. So, to combat this conundrum, the English education systems currently used within Japan should likely be overhauled along with the establishment of

collective societal efforts to change the way in which the Japanese people view English from a young age. English needs to be introduced as soon as possible and presented as an addition to the society, not as a replacement of what already exists or as a glamorized entity used in part to determine an individual's image. If Japanese society could learn to place more value in comprehension rather than passing exams, the level of stress felt by even the youngest of students might be reduced, possibly helping them feel more comfortable engaging in the development of such a useful skill.

In the process of writing this paper, I've discovered quite a lot about not only Japanese but many other Asian languages along the way, especially Korean and Chinese. Having only ever been meaningfully exposed to a writing system other than the Roman alphabet when I began studying Japanese, learning about the different types provided a much broader understanding of how other societies function and just how different even the most fundamental aspects of our lives can be depending on where we live in the world. One topic I'd like to investigate on a greater scale is the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis in relation to Japanese. In studying Japanese, I've learned many words that have very specific meanings in Japanese and lack direct translations in English. An example of one of these words is "Keigo," a term that means formal speech, a very important topic within a society that possesses such a strict age-based hierarchy. The presence of such words makes me wonder how the Japanese people might be influenced by their first language being Japanese and if my first language being English could result in a struggle to cope with certain aspects of Japanese culture.

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