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An Argument for the Teaching and Learning of Non-standard Japanese

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Students of Japanese as a foreign language who study in Japan are often startled when they discover that there are two different Japanese languages: the one they are taught inside the classroom (standard Japanese), and the one that they hear on the street or in their home-stay (non-standard Japanese). The fact that this second language is rarely taught or even talked about in their classroom is often a point of frustration for many students. This paper first explains what standard and non-standard Japanese are, then puts forward an argument as to why the teaching

of non-standard Japanese should not be excluded from JFL classrooms. It finally mentions some tools that may be useful in the teaching and learning of non-standard Japanese.

日本で日本語を第二外国語として学ぶ外国人学習者にとって、標準語以外の日本語に直面した際の驚きは大きい。つまりは、日常生活やホームステイ先の家族の間で使われている方言に触れた時である。方言の存在について、また実際にそれが使われている現状が説明されないために、学習者はしばしば混乱をきたす。本論文は、まず非標準語とはなにか、次に、なぜ非標準語がJFLで指導されるべきかについて論じる。最後に、非標準語に関する指導、学習教材について触れる。

Learning non-standard Japanese

The teaching of Japanese as a foreign language (JFL) in Japan first took shape after the Second World War. Like many foreign language programs, JFL teaching had a binding relationship with the field of literature. Translations of classic literature were the mainstay of JFL learning. By the late 1980's and early 1990's, JFL began to expand. When foreign businesses began to open offices in Japan, the influx of foreign employees who were expected to study the local language suddenly created a demand for JFL teachers and materials. This meant that the "literature-focused language curriculum had to cater to the demand of business in the 1980's and into the 1990's" (Miyagawa, 1995, p.2). The result is that many of the most widely used Japanese language textbooks, like *Japanese for busy people*, *Shin Nihongo no Kiso*, and *Japanese for Everyone* focus on the teaching and learning of standard Japanese (*Hyo-*

gyun-go) and use business or work settings and scenarios as a foundation for their syllabus. However, in the short period since the collapse of the bubble economy, the student demographic has changed, and the typical student of Japanese living in Japan is no longer an expatriate businessman. The kind of foreign residents who are studying Japanese has changed. “In the 1990’s, the number of business students has stabilized, and in some cases decreased...there is now a diversification of learner clientele” (Miyagawa, 1995, p.4) These new students may be English teachers, husbands and wives of Japanese nationals, new immigrants, entertainers, cooks, students of Japanese cultural arts and technical trainees from other Asian countries—many of whom, unlike the ex-patriot business community, are planning long-term residency in Japan. These students have very different language needs to the previous generation of JFL students. Most have very practical aims; to be able to make friends, to know how to speak to a doctor, to understand what their Japan-born children are saying, to communicate better with their Japanese spouse and their Japanese relatives, to express their emotions or to enjoy a joke on TV. The problem is that the language being taught in the classroom is not the language that is being spoken on the street and is thus not sufficiently addressing the needs of those students who are studying Japanese as a foreign language in Japan.

This paper will first outline exactly what standard and non-standard Japanese are and then discuss some of the reasons why non-standard Japanese should not be excluded from the JFL curriculum. It will also discuss some issues that might arise in conjunction with the introduction of non-standard Japanese into the classroom. Finally, a few recommendations will be made regarding texts and authentic materials that may be used for teaching and learning. It is hoped that this paper will initiate

some debate among teachers of JFL about the teaching of non-standard Japanese and perhaps stimulate some research into the needs of the changing JFL student population studying in Japan.

***Hyo-gyun-go* and Japanese language variation**

Standard Japanese, (*hyo-gyun-go*) like some other national languages of countries around the world (e.g. Bahasa Indonesia), was artificially created to serve specific functions. Those functions were governmental and administrative—mostly using the written form of the language. The standard written language employs a defined set of standard Chinese characters, called *kyoyo kanji* (daily use characters). These are the characters, first designated by the government in 1948, to be taught in schools and used in publications like government documents and daily national newspapers. The number of standard characters is 2045. Those outside the *kyoyo kanji*, of which there are said to be upward of 10000, are considered non-standard. There are also verb conjugations (*desu/masu cho*) that are considered standard and have neutral politeness level. However, compared to the written language, the spoken form of the language is much more non-standard in nature. In fact, as Kindaichi points out, “People who speak the standard language exclusively are very few... It is not a living language. The main reason being that many people speak their own regional variation of the Japanese language when communicating.” (1978, p. 60)

The number of speech variations within the Japanese language is enormous, the main variety being regional dialects. Natsuko Tsujimura in her book *Introduction to Japanese Linguistics* (1996, p. 362) cites 57 identified and catalogued regional dialects. The dialect closest to *hyo-gyun-go* is the language spoken around the Tokyo area, often called *Edo-ben*. However,

this still does not conform exactly to *hyo-jyun-go* since the dialect developed in Edo (the former name for Tokyo) has been corrupted over the last 150 years by the masses of non-Edoites who now call Tokyo home. There must be very few people who still speak what could strictly be categorized as *Edo-ben*.

Other language variations, such as social (politeness), gender and generational, will also alter speech patterns so much as to make conversations in non-standard Japanese often unintelligible to the non-native speaker. If Japanese as a foreign language (JFL) teaching concentrates purely on *hyo-jyun-go*, without teaching any language variations, many students may struggle to understand or become communicative in the language of daily conversation. This obviously creates pedagogical implications. Many students may become disheartened and depressed by the experience that for all their time spent in the classroom and for all their private study, they still struggle to understand even the most simple sentences in colloquial Japanese.

The western Japanese dialect (*Kansai-ben*)

The area of Western Japan including the prefectures of Shiga, Okayama, Nara and Hyogo, and the city districts surrounding Osaka and Kyoto, is called Kansai. It is the Kansai dialect (*Kansai-ben*) that is the most dominant and best known of all Japan's regional speech variants. The Kansai has always been an area known for its trade and Kansai people have traditionally been regarded as merchants and artisans. They are proud of their creative spirit and the differences between themselves and the bureaucrats in the capital. The main manifestation of the difference between Kansai and Kanto (Eastern Japan, the area around Tokyo) is the language.

From a purely linguistic perspective, *Kansai-ben* could almost be considered a language itself. Tsujimura's (1996) analysis of regional variations of Japanese uncovers differences in intonation, pitch, vowel sounds, voicing, vocabulary, common expressions, morphology and syntax. All these categories apply to the differences between standard Japanese and *Kansai-ben*.

Kansai is the center of Japan's manufacturing industry and has a greater GNP than France. There are over 30 million speakers of *Kansai-ben* in Japan. It is by far the most widely spoken Japanese regional dialect. Yet only now are textbooks beginning to be published that explain the grammatical structure of *Kansai-ben*.

What is non-standard Japanese?

Most people associate non-standard Japanese with regional dialects, the most specific being *Kansai-ben*. However, there are several manifestations of non-standard Japanese.

1. Regional

Regional dialects provide the majority of variations in non-standard Japanese. These variations can take the form of grammar conjugations like *~shite haru*, the semi-formal present continuous tense used in Osaka dialect, changes in intonation, or slang; such as *zurui*, (the non-standard equivalent of *ijiiwarui* meaning "you're teasing me!") or *kimoi* (the non-standard equivalent of *kimochiwarui* meaning "that's disgusting, gruesome")

2. Colloquial

This includes a multitude of collocations and slang words that are not regional and are common all over the country. For example, the way men change the end of the verb *tabetai* (want to eat) to *tabete* or the way men will shorten their morning greeting from *ohayogozaimus* to just *oos*. Another common shortened grammar phrase used by both men and women is *shinakya* (have to do), which replaces the standard form *shinai to ikenai*

3. Generational

As with regional variations, people of different ages have a wealth of vocabulary that is used exclusively by their age group. For example, older women may use words like *obebe* (meaning *kimono*), or *imajibun* (meaning “about now”). Similarly, youth language is full of corrupted grammar and slang. Young girls particularly will refer to something as *oniumai* (meaning terribly good). *Oni* is a noun, meaning devil, but is used as an adjective to mean terribly or very. High school and college girls and boys will also use the prefix *cho* (meaning ultra) in the same way, as in *choukakkoi* (very cool)

4. Gender

While the differences between men’s and women’s speech may be referred to in passing in a Japanese textbook, explanation of those differences is likely to be limited to the use of the word *kashira* by women and not by men. However, there are many differences in the way men and women speak; they use sentence ending particles such as *na*, *ne*, and *wa* differently, women often attach an honorific “*o-*” to the beginning of nouns, and men are more likely to use the most vulgar forms of verb conjugations.

Implications of excluding the non-standard Japanese from the JFL curriculum

Authenticity

The omission of non-standard language variation from the language syllabus means that students are missing out on learning a lot of authentic language. This only serves to create confusion in the mind of the language learner when he eventually meets non-standard Japanese. As Palter and Horiuchi (1995, p. 9) point out, when the student first hears authentic Japanese, it doesn’t take long to notice “nobody is speaking the Japanese so diligently studied in classes from textbooks”. If parallels and differences in grammar between standard and non-standard Japanese were taught in class, and colloquial Japanese was used more in classroom learning, students may have more of a chance of becoming competent in communicative Japanese. According to Laurén and Buss, the omission of language variations from the language classroom may detract from the authenticity of the learning situation and therefore hinder the student’s ability to develop communication skills. They believe that for students to acquire communicative skills, a teacher must “create an authentic environment that resembles the learners environment outside school” (1996, p. 1). This idea is the basis of many language learning theories and practices, particularly those involving language immersion. However, these practices are not being followed if colloquial and non-standard Japanese are not used in the classroom.

Barrier to social acceptance

Being accepted or rejected by a group is major factor in Japanese society. In Japan, everyone’s identity is a mixture of the groups they are associated with: the neighborhood,

the company, the sporting club, the social circle, the school, the local *izakaya* etc. For anyone coming to a new country, especially one that can be so isolating for a new arrival, the ability to function in the language of the group and to make friends and be accepted is often a priority. Not being able to adapt to local dialects prevents this acceptance and puts the standard Japanese speaker on the outer in a regional speech community. Inclusion of non-standard language into the JFL syllabus may help correct this problem.

Ignores significant cultural aspects associated with the language

The language of Kansai, like any other language, is indicative of the identity and personality of its users. *Kansai-ben* (the Kansai dialect) has its own history and traditions. The people of Kansai are said to have their own unique personality. *Kansai-ben* is said to be a more expressive language than the Tokyo dialect. Japan's cultural capital, Kyoto, is in the heart of Kansai. Much of Japan's contemporary culture also emerges from the Kansai. Some of the most popular songs are by Kansai singers, singing in *Kansai-ben*. A lot of the most popular TV shows are from the Kansai with the characters speaking in *Kansai-ben*. Kansai is also the center of Japan's great comic tradition. A large proportion of the nation's comedians and comic stage actors come from the Kansai and they usually perform in their local dialect. Not teaching *Kansai-ben* in the classroom excludes the student from accessing a variety of Japanese contemporary culture, much of which can be used as tools for language learning.

Other issues

Teachers may be reluctant to introduce non-standard language into their class

Some native speaking Japanese language teachers seem to feel that teaching non-standard language in the classroom is somehow “improper”, and against their creed. One Japanese teacher, speaking at the JALT 2003 conference, insisted that students must first be trained in standard Japanese language or they risked becoming impolite Japanese speakers. However, one student of Japanese at the same conference voiced her frustration that nobody had ever told her about non-standard Japanese. She said that she had been so drilled in the standard form that she now had trouble adapting to non-standard speech. There appears to be a significant gap between the teacher and the student as to what they each perceive the needs of the learner to be.

Written and spoken language differences

It must be remembered that non-standard Japanese refers predominantly to spoken language. If the teacher makes this point clear, it may help the student differentiate between non-standard and standard forms as well as reinforcing the need for the student to be proficient in both forms of language

In-country and out-of-country students

When considering how much, or what level of non-standard or colloquial language should be taught, it is pertinent to discriminate between students studying in-country and those studying abroad. Those students studying Japanese in Japan have a much more immediate need to become functional in the kind of spoken Japanese that is all around them. These students are much more likely to benefit from the addition of non-standard Japanese into their language course curriculum.

Tools for learning and teaching non-standard Japanese

The number of specially prepared books relating to non-standard Japanese is very limited, and among those, almost all focus on *Kansai-ben* or *Osaka-ben*. However, there are a few very good books available. The best of those is *Kiite Oboeru Kansai (Osaka)-ben* (An Introduction to *Kansai* Dialect). This book covers all the basic grammatical forms and speaking customs regularly used by *Kansai* natives and explains each point in a thorough and easy to understand manner.

Kinki Japanese is more of a handbook than a textbook and covers all the basic words and phrases that are needed to get by in the *Kinki* region of Japan (*Kinki* regions and *Kansai* regions overlap and have similar dialects). The book is mostly written in *Romaji* (the alphabetized form of Japanese) and is thus more accessible and better suited to students of beginner level Japanese.

Probably the best overall guide to help the learner navigate their way through non-standard Japanese is the Japanese pop culture and language-learning magazine, *Mangajin*. This magazine was published between 1992 and 1996. It is now, sadly, out-of-print. But back copies are available on the *Mangajin* website. <www.mangajin.com/mangajin/>

It uses Japanese comics to highlight conversational situations then, in great detail, explains the grammar usage and politeness levels of each word and phrase. The comics *Mangajin* uses in its examples are often full of non-standard Japanese.

Websites are another place to look for help learning non-standard Japanese. One example is; *Let's study Kansai-ben*

(<www.ox.compsoc.net/~gemini/kansai_ben/study.htm>), which gives explanations in *Romaji* of several *Kansai-ben* phrases and words.

Authentic sources such as Japanese movies and animated cartoons are also great tools for learning or teaching non-standard Japanese in the classroom. DVD's are especially useful. Because the sub-titles can be changed from Japanese to English, students can fully understand the meaning as well as the situational usage of all kinds of non-standard Japanese phrases. Animated movies by Miyazaki Hayao are particularly useful.

Conclusion

Non-standard spoken Japanese has for the most part been ignored in the teaching of Japanese as a foreign language. As Horiuchi and Palter point out, "Even though it's the language spoken by your neighbors and everyone around you, even your teacher, it isn't taught in classes and there are no textbooks or tapes to help you master it" (1995, p. 17).

The overall effect of omitting non-standard language from any Japanese language curriculum decreases the students' chances of broadening their functional ability. It can also often cause confusion about what language should be used in what situation. At this point in time, there appear to be no Japanese language courses that include the teaching of *Kansai-ben* or any other non-standard language forms. Very few textbooks or courses even address the notions of language variation within Japanese, be those variations regional, social or gender based. Until the teaching of language variation gains a greater emphasis in Japanese language courses, students will most likely struggle to communicate when they leave the classroom and are finally confronted with real, living language.

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