Language and Society in Japan

Review of Nanette Gottlieb, Cambridge, 2005. ix+169 pages.

ISBN 0 521 82577 6, £40.00 hb.
ISBN 0 521 53284 1, £15.99 pb.

Chad Nilep
Department of Linguistics
University of Colorado
UCB 295
Boulder, CO 80309
USA
phone 303-492-8456
fax 303-492-4416
chad.nilep@colorado.edu

Nanette Gottlieb, Language and Society in Japan, Cambridge, 2005 (ix+169 pp, £40.00, ISBN 0 521 82577 6; p.b. £15.99, ISBN 0 521 53284 1.)

When reading a book on language and society, one has certain expectations for the subjects to be covered: language planning, education, dialects and variation, language and identity, gender, etc. Certainly, these elements are present in Nanette Gottlieb's *Language and Society in Japan*. In addition, though, and what is less expected, is a great deal of information about orthography and information technology. This is, no doubt, attributable in part to widespread ideologies about script and the Japanese character; it is also not surprising that the author of *Kanji Politics* (Gottlieb 1995) and *Word-Processing Technology in Japan: Kanji and the Keyboard* (Gottlieb 2000) should take great interest in these issues. Gottlieb gives a brief overview of many important historical and contemporary issues related to language in Japanese society, often with an eye to literacy or script reform. The breadth of coverage in such a brief volume is impressive. While many sections warrant deeper analysis, the book is definitely worthwhile as an introduction.

The book includes eight chapters, with slight overlap among them. Chapter one, "The Japanese language," attempts to define both what it means to be a Japanese person, and the boundaries of the Japanese language. Gottlieb dissects widely held views about cultural and linguistic homogeneity, describing a great range of people who, despite individual differences, "lay claim to one degree or another of 'Japanese-ness'" (3). Contrary to the image of the *sarariman*, the diligent monolingual male Japanese salaried worker often thought of as prototypical, statistics show that the largest proportion of Japanese workers are female temporary employees, without university education. Additionally, *zainichi* Korean and Chinese residents (some of whom are Japanese citizens), native Ainu, and foreign-born *gaijin* (literally "outside people") comprise significant minorities of the Japanese population. Likewise, despite a monolithic image of language use in Japan, regional as well as social dialects contribute considerable diversity. Chapter two, "Language diversity in Japan," continues these observations, describing the place of the Ainu language, Ryukyuan (Okinawan), Korean, Chinese, and English in the country.

Chapters one and two also include Gottlieb's assessment of the *nihonjinron* ("theory of the Japanese people") ideology and its stance toward language. *Nihonjinron* is a belief in the uniqueness and homogeneity of the Japanese people, popular among Japanese as well as foreign intellectuals since World War II (e.g. Benedict 1946, Doi 1973). This view equates Japanese nationality and ethnicity in racial as well as cultural terms. *Nihonjinron* typically sees Japanese people as linguistically monolithic and the Japanese language as uniquely complex and difficult. There is a belief that the Japanese language is uniquely suited to the Japanese mind, and that foreigners can never truly penetrate its intricacy. This view has been critiqued by a great number of scholars, from whom Gottlieb draws. Additionally, her reference to significant numbers of Japanese foreign language speakers (estimates range from two to ten million speakers abroad), as well as the diversity of language varieties spoken in Japan, suggest that the *nihonjinron* view of language is more a myth than an empirically supportable theory.

Chapters three and four, while nominally about language and identity, focus largely on language planning and script reform. "Language and national identity: Evolving views" (chapter three) recounts the political struggles over language during the

Meiji Period (1868-1912) and subsequent efforts at language planning. Much of this enterprise relates to the establishment of a standard orthography, as well as standardizing the spoken language. Japanese had, since the sixth century, been written with Chinese characters. Various nineteenth century genres of writing, based on classical Chinese or classical Japanese, bore very little resemblance to spoken Japanese. The *kanbun* ("Chinese writing") style, which used Chinese characters and classical Chinese word order, was associated with both the temple and the court, and thus was highly valued. On the other hand, *wabun* ("Japanese writing"), which used Japanese *hiragana* and *katakana* syllabaries and more nearly approximated spoken language, was considered *onnade* ("woman's writing") and enjoyed far less prestige.

The abolition of the Edo Period class system, plus Meiji Period reforms of education and communications occasioned a great rethinking of language and writing. On one side, liberal scholars argued for a new orthography based on contemporary speech. On the other, conservatives argued that *kanbun* and *wabun* were the only forms suitable for educated people, the spoken language being too vulgar and inefficient. Much of this debate was worked out in the realm of publishing, as novels and periodicals became

increasingly popular and influential. Gradually during the Meiji and Taisho (1912-1926) periods, novels, textbooks, and newspapers assumed a written style based on speech, especially the dialects spoken in Tokyo. Eventually, this style would become the norm, even for official government documents.

Chapter four, "Language and identity: The policy approach," revisits these struggles over script reform, this time focusing on public policy responses and the lobbying efforts of linguistic organizations from the Meiji Period through the nineteen-nineties. Two important groups in this respect are the *Kokugo Chousa Iinkai* (National Language Research Council), a committee established within the Ministry of Education in 1902 to advise the government on language planning, and the Genbun'itchi Club, a group of scholars formed in 1900 to promote the use of colloquial style in writing. The story of language planning in Japan during the twentieth century is largely a shifting policy on the number of *kanji* (Chinese characters) to be required for compulsory education. While reform-minded scholars pushed for the adoption of phonetic script, conservative forces in the government sought to preserve the use of Chinese characters. The result has been slight fluctuations in the list of required kanji and use of *okurigana*,

hiragana suffixes used in conjunction with kanji to show inflection and suggest pronunciation. Even occupation following World War II saw little major upheaval in script reform, despite suggestions by some Allied Occupation staff members that Japan might adopt the roman alphabet.

During Japan's rapid modernization, the establishment of a national spoken language was also an important issue. In addition to script reform, the National Language Research Council set out to describe the dialects spoken in Japan and to promote a standard variety. Gottlieb describes the council's efforts this way:

> It did not succeed in formulating any lasting policies, in part because of the still strongly-entrenched, generalized political opposition to language reform of any kind. It did, however, succeed in its aim of delineating a standard form of Japanese in its normative grammars, *A Grammar of Spoken Language* (Kōgohō 1916) and a supplementary volume in 1917. […] In these books, the standard language

> was clearly defined as that currently spoken by educated
>
> people in the Yamanote district of Tokyo. [58]

Gottlieb does not acknowledge more recent scholarship suggesting that this Yamanote dialect was itself an idealization, created in part by language scholars. Inoue (2002), for example, points out that the bourgeois class emerging in Tokyo's Yamanote district at the beginning of the twentieth century was linguistically heterogeneous, consisting of newcomers to Tokyo from various parts of the country.

Gottlieb does, however, point out some of the effects that the establishment of a standard national language had on various groups inside as well as outside of Japan. One of the groups most affected was the Ainu, the ethnic minority indigenous to northern Japan. Prior to the Meiji Period, the Ainu had been forbidden to speak Japanese. Then in 1868, following the annexation of Hokkaido and northern Honshu by the Japanese government, new policies forbade speaking the Ainu language or practicing traditional customs, and compelled Ainu people to learn Japanese and take Japanese names. These policies were aimed both at assimilating the Ainu people, and strengthening Japan's claim to the land. In the aftermath of these policies, many Ainu were forced into poverty,

and the Ainu language became endangered. This policy began to be reversed in 1899 with the passage of the Hokkaido Former Natives Protection Law, and since 1997 the Law for the Promotion of Ainu Culture and for the Dissemination and Advocacy of Ainu Traditions has directed local governments to establish programs to promote Ainu culture. The Ainu language remains greatly endangered today, though as Maher (2002) points out, the imminent death of the language has been repeatedly reported throughout the past century. The language is today more commonly studied by adults than acquired as a native language by Ainu children.

The mandatory use of Japanese and prohibition of local languages was also official policy during Japan's occupations of Taiwan (1895-1945) and Korea (1910-1945). As in northern Japan, these policies strengthened the colonial government's claim over the occupied areas. In addition, the use of Japanese as both a lingua franca and as a medium of instruction throughout the Japanese Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere (which also included Micronesia and parts of China and Southeast Asia) was intended to enrich the occupied people and to create loyalty to the Japanese Emperor. Following liberation at the end of World War II, the formerly dominated regions experienced a

backlash against both the Japanese language and Japan itself, scuttling the hopes of many intellectual and political leaders to establish Japanese as a major world language.

While many of the chapters in Gottlieb's book treat the relation of literacy to aspects of Japanese history, policy, or identity, chapter five, "Writing and reading in Japan," discusses the basic elements of the Japanese writing system. The chapter introduces the complicated system of writing, and discusses literacy, education, and publishing in Japan. Japanese is commonly written with four different scripts. Logographic kanji are used for ubiquitous Chinese loan words as well as many Japanese content words; the hiragana syllabary is used for inflection and for those Japanese words not commonly written in kanji; katakana syllabary is used for loan words from languages other than Chinese, onomatopoeia, and as a form accentuation; and the roman alphabet is used in advertising, electronic environments, and other special settings. While students are expected to learn 1,945 kanji characters during compulsory education, estimates are that people actually encounter between 3,000 and 3,500 unique characters in everyday tasks such as reading newspapers or other common texts. Education through the junior high school level is compulsory in Japan, and the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports,

Science and Technology (MEXT) publishes official lists of the characters to be learned at each grade level. However, despite the widely held assumption that this results in a uniformly literate population, Gottlieb points out research suggesting that, not surprisingly, mastery of the writing system is not perfect. Unfortunately, ideology seems to trump experience in the measurement of literacy rates. The Japanese government often cites a literacy rate of above 99% for Japanese adults. However, a number of facts make this figure dubious. For example, studies suggest that about 4.5% of Japanese school children have difficulty reading due to dyslexia, a condition which is not specifically recognized by MEXT and thus not generally dealt with in schools. Gottlieb also points out that estimates placing literacy rates above 99% are based on the number of people able to read hiragana. However, nearly all texts in Japan use a combination of orthographies; the only texts commonly written exclusively in hiragana are early grade school primers. While the literacy rate in Japan is undoubtedly extremely high (the United Nations lists it as one of twenty countries with the highest level of functional literacy), it is almost certainly not as high as commonly held beliefs, or official government estimates, hold it to be.

As mentioned above, Japan is often thought of as culturally as well as linguistically homogeneous, both by Japanese people and by foreigners. However, this image ignores diverse groups living in Japan. Chapter six, “Representation and identity: Discriminatory language,” discusses the position of many of these minorities, and the ways they are depicted in common discourses. Gottlieb briefly mentions a distinction between “discriminatory language” and “linguistic stereotyping” (101) in this regard, but unfortunately does not expand on the difference between the terms as she intends them. Here, as elsewhere in the book, is a tantalizing glimpse of what may be important theoretical issues. No doubt Gottlieb has much more to say, but the brief nature of the volume leaves some issues only partially illuminated.

Gottlieb introduces discriminatory discourses directed at several repressed minorities, and the reactions to such discourses. Specifically mentioned are the treatment of women, persons with disabilities, Ainu, Korean, and Chinese minority residents, foreigners, homosexuals, and Burakumin. This last group bears description here, both because they are the largest minority group indigenous to Japan and because the reactions of the Buraku Liberation League are a model of contemporary anti-discrimination

campaigns in Japan. During the Edo Period (roughly 1600-1867), the Japanese people were divided into a four-tiered hereditary class system, based on occupations. Burakumin (literally "village people," so called because of their exclusion from cities) were outside this system; their occupations as butchers or leather tanners made them ritually impure untouchables. In fact the word Burakumin was adopted as a euphemism, replacing the highly offensive *eta* "filthy, polluted." Although this class system was officially disbanded during the Meiji era, discrimination against Burakumin continues to this day. Since Burakumin are physically and culturally indistinguishable from other Japanese people, discrimination against individuals is largely facilitated by the circulation of lists of Burakumin families in print and, more recently, on the internet.

The Buraku Liberation League organizes protests to denounce the use of discriminatory language in media and public discourse. Their vocal protests during the 1950s and 1960s lead some media outlets to deal more openly with issues of discrimination, not only against Burakumin but also against other marginalized groups. More recently, though, the publication of lists of nondiscriminatory language by groups such as NHK (Japan Broadcasting Association) has been criticized as *kotobagari* ("word

hunting," or political correctness). As Gottlieb says, "It is certainly true that while the emergence of such lists is on the surface of things a victory for the Burakumin Liberation League and other groups in controlling the kind of language used about them, on a deeper level it is a defeat, since rather than risk infringement the media have chosen to stop discussing issues of discrimination almost entirely" (106).

Chapter seven, called "Shifting electronic identities," actually describes the development of word processing technology during the 1980s and 1990s, and the effects this technology is having on language policy and language ideologies. Due to the complexity of the Japanese writing system, typewriters were cumbersome and unpopular. Thus, hand writing was the norm for business, government, and education. However, during the eighties word processors were developed which allowed users to type using the roman alphabet, and automatically convert the characters to kanji and kana. This new technology became popular among young people, so that electronically produced documents began to replace hand writing not only in the production of official documents, but even for personal communication such as letters. The use of personal computers emerged later in Japan than in other industrialized nations, but has begun to

increase in the past ten years. Internet and text messaging have also become popular features of the omnipresent mobile telephones. While many younger people view the changes in communication technology as exciting and liberating, conservative forces bemoan the loss of tradition and the deleterious effects of word processors on writing abilities. Indeed, it is common today to see letters to newspapers and on-line forums both from older people and from people in their teens and twenties – people who have grown up in the *waapuro* ("word processor") era – describing the attrition of writing skills. There is, however, little evidence that these changes have had a significant effect on overall literacy. There was some discussion during the late nineties that, since technology could simplify the production of characters, education standards should shift from writing kanji toward reading a greater number. Gottlieb does not foresee change any time soon, however, given the dissolution of the National Language Council in 2001.

Gottlieb's "Conclusion" (chapter eight) reminds the reader that Japan is more linguistically diverse than is commonly thought, containing many linguistic minorities. She goes on to contemplate what would be necessary to allow Japanese to become a major world language. Despite Japan's political and economic power, and despite calls

throughout the modern era for greater international influence, the Japanese language does not seem poised to become an important international language. While various reasons are suggested for this fact, including the complex writing system and the lack of Japanese-speaking countries, the greatest obstacle to increasing the spread of Japanese second language speakers is probably ideology. Gottlieb writes, "Greater proactivity from Japan itself is needed in thinking of Japanese in international terms rather than in the previously prevalent Nihonjinron terms of the language as belonging to the Japanese alone and being too difficult for non-Japanese to master" (142). Extreme prescriptive attitudes persist toward Japanese grammar, holding second language speakers to dogmatic standards seldom met even by native speakers. Groups such as the Japan Foundation argue that people should recognize the importance of language as a tool for communication, and be more tolerant of perceived imperfections in use by non-Japanese. Even within such calls for tolerance, however, one detects echoes of the ethnocentric belief in the essential difference between the Japanese and the foreigner.

Nanette Gottlieb has managed, in a very brief space, to introduce a broad range of issues relating to language in Japanese society, history, and culture. One complaint is that

her analyses at times appear to be abbreviated, giving an indication of potentially richer insights before quickly moving on to other issues. Still, the book provides an extremely valuable introduction to important social issues in Japan, as well as discussion of the place of Japanese language elsewhere in the world. It is recommended reading for those interested in Japan, and could provide a useful introductory overview for a course on Japanese language and society.

Benedict, R. 1946. *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword: Patterns of Japanese Culture*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Doi, T. 1973. *Amae no Kouzou* (The Anatomy of Dependence). Tokyo: Kodansha International.

Gottlieb, N. 1995. *Kanji Politics: Language Policy and Japanese Script*. London: Kegan Paul International.

Gottlieb, N. 2000. *Word-Processing Technology in Japan: Kanji and the Keyboard*. Richmond: Curzon Press.

Inoue, M. 2002. Gender, language, and modernity: Toward and effective history of Japanese women's language. American Ethnologist 29(2), 392-422.

Maher, J. 2002. Language policy for multicultural Japan: Establishing the new paradigm. In S. Baker (ed.), *Language Policy: Lessons from Global Models*. Monterey: Monterey Institute of International Relations.