

Languages of the Peoples of Asia and Africa

Языки народов стран Азии и Африки

DOI 10.31696/2618-7043-2020-3-1-121-128

УДК 81-2(«1945/...»)=811.521

Оригинальная статья

Original Paper

Myths and Misconceptions in Japanese linguistic research

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Abstract: the author discusses some misconceptions about the Japanese language and its functioning as appearing in the Japanese linguistic literature in post-War Japan. Among them: the uniqueness of the Japanese language, its richness, usage of indigenous vocabulary. He argues that these misconceptions originated in the post War period and suggests to approach them as a cultural and psychological phenomenon.

Keywords: language, Japanese; language Japanese, history of; language Japanese, origins of; language Japanese, the functionality of; Japan, society 1945–

For citation: Alpatov V. M. Myths and Misconceptions in Japanese linguistic research. *Orientalistica*. 2020;3(1):121–128. DOI: 10.31696/2618-7043-2020-3-1-121-128.

Японская лингвистика: ошибки и мифы

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Резюме: автор обсуждает некоторые неправильные представления о японском языке и его функционировании, возникшие в японской лингвистической литературе в послевоенный период. Среди них: уникальность японского языка, его богатство, опора исключительно на японскую лексику. Он утверждает, что эти заблуждения возникли в послевоенный период, и предлагает рассматривать их не как научный, но как культурный и психологический феномен.

Ключевые слова: язык, японский; язык, японский, его история; язык, японский, происхождение; язык, японский, функционирование; Япония, общество, послевоенный период (1945–)

Для цитирования: Алпатов В. М. Японская лингвистика: ошибки и мифы. *Ориенталистика*. 2020;3(1):121–128. (In Eng.) DOI: 10.31696/2618-7043-2020-3-1-121-128.

One would not exaggerate by saying that the Japanese people among all the Altaic peoples pay the most attention to their mother tongue. They consider Japanese as the most important national heritage, and there are many myths



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or, better to say misconceptions regarding the language functionality in Japan. This specific attitude to the language is rooted in the local history and geography, which due to the insular location of the country plays a crucial role.

It is now generally acknowledged that the Japanese ethnos was finally formed in the first centuries A. D. by the blend of the indigenous population which spoke an Austronesian language with Altaic tribes, which invaded the Japanese Isles from the continent. This branch of the Altaic peoples became subsequently isolated from the other Altaic-speaking world. One of the results of this fusion of various peoples became the language. Some scholars considered it to be a hybrid, however, the Russian scholar Sergei Starostin, a specialist in comparative linguistics, has successfully proven its Altaic origin. I am persuaded by his results. The newly developed language preserved the basic Altaic grammar and vocabulary, however, did in a certain way change the original structure especially phonetics it is different from that of other Altaic peoples. The third important ethnic component of the Japanese Isles was the Ainu people. However, the contribution of the Ainu language to the formation of the Japanese is far from being significant: its main contribution is reflected in the local toponyms. Otherwise, it is comparable to that of the American Indian languages on American English.

Any now existing cognate language is connected to the Japanese through very distant kinship. The Korean language, for example, is probably the closest relative of the Japanese, however, the linguistic distance between them is longer than between any pair of the Indo-Germanic languages. There is no other language, which is equally socially significant and boasts the long-standing script tradition, which would be equally isolated from external influence.

Historically, there are also some important features, which did influence the linguistic consciousness of the Japanese people. Their ethnic identity and the historic territory have been preserved for two thousand years; the only exception was spreading the Japanese to the North at the expense of Ainu, which took place up to the 19th cent. Another specific development underwent the population of the Ryukyu islands: these islands have occasionally lost and subsequently re-established contacts with mainland Japan, the territory itself, however, always remained peripheral to the mainland. Equally up to the 19th cent. Japan never expanded and has never been invaded until the 20th cent. The two unsuccessful attempts of Mongolians, which did take place in 1274 and 1281 cannot be taken into consideration. Therefore, Japan remains one of the very few Asian countries, which did never face the problem of protecting its language from the languages of the alien population [1, p. 18]. The contacts of the Japanese with the other peoples up to the 19th cent. were rather sporadic, moreover, the peoples who had done mostly contact the Japanese spoke languages that were significantly different from the Japanese (Chinese, later Dutch and English). The contacts of Japanese with other Altaic languages except Korean did not exist (equally as did not exist the contacts with the



Austronesian languages). Moreover, the contacts with Korean transpired to be important only in the initial stage of the linguistic interaction. Subsequently, they stopped and were reestablished only in the 20th cent.

As we see, the linguistic situation in Japan had been continued to be very stable for the period of two millennia, which can be considered as almost unique. The ancient Altaic and Austronesian languages disappeared many centuries ago, the place of Ainu remained peripheral and immigrant communities did not almost exist till the 19th cent. However, this situation was not a pre-requisite for the linguistic homogeneity. Not infrequently the people who lived in the villages only 1000 km apart were not able to understand each other. However, such linguistic diversity could be recorded only on the “dialectal” level. In this context should be noted that the word *hoogen* (literally, *side language*) became widespread in Japan only since the late Middle Ages. It became a replacement of the term *dialect* since the beginning of the European influence in the 19th cent. The difference between the “language” and the “dialect” is not usually established by referring to some objective linguistic features, however, the ethnic consciousness plays here the major role. This happens everywhere, and it is not surprising that every idiom, which did exist and develop on the Japanese Islands was considered by the scholars to be a form of the same language, i.e. Japanese. This notion was coined and subsequently developed by the Japanese national *kokugaku* scholars in the 17th–18th cent.

One more specific feature of the Japanese language situation is that both old written Japanese languages (Japanized Chinese *kambun* and properly Japanese *bungo*) were used explicitly by the Japanese people. This fact distinguished these languages from the other old written languages, which had not dissimilar functionality, e.g. Latin, Sanskrit, Old Church Slavonic, Classical Arabian, Written Chinese, etc. to name but a few. Contrary to the Japanese all these languages were international. The national linguistic tradition in Japan formed in the 17th–18th cent. was based upon *bungo* and as such remained purely Japanese. This fact made it unique within the phenomenon of the old linguistic tradition.

Along with that, at some time other languages still did significantly influence the Japanese. In the first instance, it was the Chinese influence, which took place in the first millennium A. D. in the second that of some European languages of the 19th–21st cent. This influence, however, was also somewhat unusual. It was not a compulsory influence from the outside, apart from that of the American English during the time of the American occupation. Remarkably, the Japanese themselves selected all that was necessary to borrow from other languages. Another important aspect is that due to its nature Japanese is different from other languages in terms of borrowing. In most languages, loan- and foreign words do not form any particular subsystem, neither exist strict borders between original and loan words. Contrary to that, the Japanese operates three subsystems: the subsystem of “original” (Ur-words), which include the Altaic, Austronesian and ancient words (*wago*), the subsystem of Chinese



words (*kango*) and the subsystem of borrowings from the Western languages especially from American English (*gairaigo*, or *katakana*). The three subsystems differ in their phonetic and grammatical features and also tend to differentiate on the level of semantics. One of the two Japanese alphabets – *katakana* – is used first of all for recording the borrowings from the West. These borrowings although numerous, they still operate as solitary subsystems of the language. The fact that they do exist still allows us to consider the Japanese language as the major component of the Japanese culture.

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The situation as above became a reason for emerging of some stable linguistic misconceptions, which are deeply rooted in the mass consciousness in Japan have even found their way into the Japanese and even the Western scholarship. These ideas have been already studied [2, 1982; 3, 1986] and received negative comments

The Japanese as people are known for having a vivid interest in the problems of language. However, in this context, the word “language” should not be understood as “language” in general or any foreign language, e.g. Greek. The Japanese are interested exclusively in the linguistic phenomena of their language.

Such an interest is already reflected in the way how the Japanese people identify their language, i.e. in the name, which they call it. In the Modern Japanese, there are two such names, not one as in many other languages. The less used word *nihongo* (Japanese language) is employed when they try to identify the Japanese language among other languages. This is the only word also used in the context of mastering this language by foreigners. However, when it is meant the language the Japanese people speak, they use another name, *kokugo*, literally *the country language*. This word is not very old: it began to be used in the second half of the 19th cent. when Japan became subject to the influence of European culture. Before there was no need to distinguish between these two culturally marked forms of the same language. The word *kokugo* can be described as “subjective”: literally, it means “this or our language” or the “native tongue” [4, p. 33]. One has to say that in the Japanese culture the use of this term is not universally welcome. Many people consider it too nationalistic [5, vol. 1, p. vi]. In several Japanese universities the courses which titles had comprised the traditional name *kokugo* had to use the word *nihongo* because of the fear of being charged with accusations in nationalism [5, vol. 1, p. viii].

Another stable “myth” about the Japanese language is its “uniqueness”, which comprises various aspects of the language development and functionality, however, this fact is exaggerated. The doyen of the Japanese sociolinguistic studies, Professor Suzuki Takao writes that there is no other country except Japan where people have been using for 1500 years the same language [6, p. 19–20]. In his opinion, the “Beowulf” cannot be considered as the national “*monumentum litteraturae*” of the English people because the English language



has been changed significantly since the Norman conquest. At the same time the “Manyooshu” (text almost contemporary to the “Beowulf”) is “the” text for the Japanese people and culture [6, p. 150]. Similarly, Haga Yasushi supports a view according to which the national languages in Europe were shaped only in the last centuries. The Japanese language, however, became the “national” language many centuries earlier [4, p. 30]. The specific features of the Japanese language as well as the fact that the phenomenon of the “ethnic minorities” not known to Japan have developed an erroneous idea that being Japanese is identical to “speaking the Japanese language”. It is possible that this assumption became a reason for comparatively small efforts of Japan to make their language “international”. There was a suggestion to recognize the Japanese language as one of the UNO languages at the end of the 1970s, which was withdrawn in 1980 [1, p. 74].

The stability of the Japanese language situation has been already mentioned above as well as the ethnic homogeneity of the Japanese population considered to be unique. However, this approach might not be appropriate, since it is not correct to apply the modern notions of the “nation” and “national language” to the Ancient cultures. Besides, the Japanese linguistic situation still does not seem to be unique if compared, for example, with the linguistic situation in Iceland. Apart from this, one should not forget that the linguistic situation in Japan recently underwent significant changes: nowadays the immigrant communities in Japan amount up to two million people.

There is also another important issue, which has significantly contributed to the “uniqueness” of the Japanese language. The Japanese national self-consciousness has been shaped by the distinctive opposition to Chinese and subsequently the Western cultures. This attitude was also reflected on the perception of the language: the *kokugaku* school overestimated some specific features of Japanese by comparing them to the similar phenomena in Chinese and Sanskrit. Similarly, nowadays the Japanese native speakers when describing their language also highlight in the language structure those features, which are missing in English as well as other Western languages. In the articles and books written by Japanese authors many times it has been pointed to the fact that the difference in language, racial features and religion between Japan on one hand and the “Big Seven” (and later on the “Big Eight”) on other hand, is more significant than the same difference between the Western countries among themselves. Suzuki Takao writes that most languages, cultures, and religions are somehow cognate, whereas “we” (i.e. the Japanese people) are not “related” to the others [6, p. 73–74]. It is evident, however, that Suzuki as many other Japanese authors compares here the Japanese people only with the Christians of the white race who speak Indo-Germanic languages and therefore reduces the countries of the world to seven or eight most developed countries. In particular, the Japanese do not compare the Japanese with the other Asian languages, e.g. Altaic. Even the Japanese word-order, if compared to that of the Western languages can be considered “unique”, although such word-order



“subject – direct object – verb” (SOV) is the most widespread word order in Asian languages (with exception of China).

Another misconception is namely the widespread idea that Japanese is very complicated. Sometimes people in Japan even say that a foreigner can never master it. They mean here not every “foreigner” but the Western people *par excellence*. Remarkably, such or similar ideas were never expressed when in the first half of the 20th cent. Japan imposed the Japanese language in Korea and the other conquered countries. Shibatani Masayoshi the well-known American linguist of Japanese extraction in his Japanese grammar wrote several paragraphs, which deal with this wrong albeit widespread idea [7, p. 89–90]. It is not impossible that the source of this dates back to the time of the American occupation of Japan or could be even earlier. Anyway, almost all the American people who visited Japan (especially members of the occupation administration) did not bother to learn Japanese. The complication of mastering of some features of this language (especially the Japanese script) is evident. However, I met an educated Japanese who although had spoken in Japanese to a foreigner and was also aware that this particular foreigner would be a specialist in Japan and Japanese culture, nevertheless, he was astonished to see this foreigner was able to read a Japanese newspaper. This was the clear evidence of the “language misconception”, which was still preserved and nurtured by some authors who wrote about the so-called *nihonjinron*, i.e. the *science about Japanese people*. The “language misconception” is still alive and cannot be diminished in spite of the existence, for instance, of people getting literary prizes for works of literature in Japanese [1, p. 74].

Another misleading idea is regarding the exceptional “richness” of Japanese, which is evidenced by a great number of synonyms. However, on closer inspection, these synonyms transpire to be primordial lexical items Japanese words as well as numerous borrowings from Chinese and English. The above mentioned Shibatani Masayoshi referred to this problem likewise [7, p. 89–90]. Indeed, many concepts can be expressed by the combinations of just three words: *wago*, *kango* and *gairaigo*. However, in most cases there is a stylistic differentiation: *wago* (primordial) is colloquial or neutral, *kango* (borrowed from Chinese) are literary and *gairaigo* (borrowed from English) is related to the high technologies. Anyway, a big number of synonyms is appropriate for any well-developed language. The issue regarding the exceptionally big number of synonyms can be confirmed or rejected based on pure statistics, which is surprisingly avoided by the authors of publications of *nihonjinron*.

Furthermore, the linguistic stereotypes inherent to the Japanese culture emphasize the inclination of Japanese people to silence, non-verbal means of communication, etc. Thus Haga Yasushi explicitly points to the fact that the Japanese prefer to avoid the verbal transmission of all the information. They also do not trust the oral language and similarly are not inclined to use any verbal explanation [4, p. 104, 260]. Takemoto Shozo says that from the



Japanese point of view the Western people talk too much. He sees the reason for that in the Western culture where one uses a language as a weapon against other people, whereas the Japanese understand each other by using fewer words because they communicate with each other as members of one large family [8, p. 267]. The Japanese “culture of silence” is reflected even in Japanese proverbs [9, p. 42]. Some authors consider this phenomenon to have its roots in the teaching of Confucius [3, p. 79].

The culture of ellipsis (when a speaker omits the information which is already clear from the general context to his audience) exists in every language. In Japanese, the ellipsis is used there where anybody who speaks any Western language would not use it. For example, the well-developed system of the Japanese politeness forms (*keigo*) provides an ample opportunity to omit personal pronouns. The agglutinative character of the Japanese case markers permits to omit them; on the contrary, it is impossible to omit the inflected case endings of the Western languages. Therefore, although this misconception is based on some real phenomena, these phenomena are not connected with the mainstream development of the language. Besides, one should not forget that the rules of the Japanese society demand an individual to keep silent in the company of the members of the so-called “out-groups” and foreigners are frequently considered to be namely the “out-groups”. At the same time, everybody who ran into groups of traveling Japanese tourists or visited Japanese student-halls has enough reasons to register that the Japanese people can be very talkative and loud indeed.

At last Japanese linguistic thinking can adopt some conception from the Western linguistic thought, especially if they do not contradict the habitual linguistic stereotypes, like Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf’s ideas. This conception allows to explain every difference between Japan and the other countries by the difference of their languages. However, in reality, the authors of such publications compare Japan only with Western countries. A typical example is the book by the two brothers [10], which I have referred to in my talk at the PIAC conference [11].

In conclusion one has to say that such misconceptions have very little with the scholarship and using them in serious research should not be accepted. However, the misconceptions (often on the level of the cultural myths, and even those which pertain to linguistic studies) can be instrumental in strengthening national consolidation. Probably these misconceptions were shaped in Japan after the country was defeated in the Second World War. Not only the economy lay in debris; even the old values ceased to exist. Therefore, it was necessary to find new, stable but neutral values to describe “us” and the “others”. A Russian émigré, the writer Vladimir Nabokov, wrote in a different historical period: “All that I possess is my language” («Всё, что есть у меня, – мой язык»). Indeed, the cultural and political loss in Japan after 1945, especially for those who did not leave the country was immense. One of the very few constants, which remained and was carried off from the pre-war period was the Japanese language. Every



Japanese could be proud of such a value. Some other values added were later added to this value. This issue has attracted R. A. Miller's attention, who at the beginning of the 1980th [2, p. 36] published some research. Still, he was far from being eulogistic and saw in the phenomenon as above only its anti-scholarly side. Contrary to him, in my opinion, this phenomenon apart from purely linguistic aspect has another one – that of the national psychology.

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Conflicts of Interest Disclosure

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

Раскрытие информации о конфликте интересов

Автор заявляет об отсутствии конфликта интересов.

Article info

Received: February 3, 2020
Reviewed: February 11, 2020
Accepted: February 11, 2020

Информация о статье

Поступила в редакцию: 3 февраля 2020 г.
Одобрена рецензентами: 11 февраля 2020 г.
Принята к публикации: 11 февраля 2020 г.