Japanese in European language education policy

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Abstract

The paper explores the intersection of two models, a model of the conditions for second language learning (Spolsky 1989) and a model of language policy (Spolsky 2004) expanded to deal with language management. The conditions models proposed that to account for the learning of an additional language, one needs to consider a large number of conditions grouped roughly into current language knowledge, ability and language learning aptitude, motivation and attitude, and exposure. The language policy model distinguishes between language practices, language beliefs (including attitudes) and language management; the latter is further divided in management of language status, management of language form, and language education policy. Because of the complex interaction between the many parts of these two models in any society, the treatment of a specific issue like the teaching of Japanese as Foreign Language (JFL) in Europe in the age of globalisation involves considering a cluster of factors. Two of the most important are motivation and exposure, which set major challenges for language educators.

1. Japanese in European language policy

It has been a great honour to participate in this symposium, not as an expert in the topic, but as a student of educational linguistics and language policy eager to learn the specific problems of one case of language education policy. In this paper, I want to explore the intersection of two models. The first is the model of the conditions for second language learning that I developed 25 years ago (Spolsky 1989). The second is the model of language policy (Spolsky 2004) that I have recently presented and that I am currently expanding into a possible theory of language management (Spolsky 2007b). Connecting the two is the claim that educational linguistics (Spolsky 2003; Spolsky and Hult (2008) is most usefully seen as the body of techniques available for the implementation of language education policy (Spolsky 2007a). My goal in this paper is not to offer solutions, but to set out a model that should contribute to understanding the nature of the problems that are being faced.

Essentially, the effect of this approach is to contextualize language learning in two relevant contexts, the neuro-psychological and social. The conditions model aimed to embody, as it were, language learning both in the brain and in the mind. It developed originally on the basis of J. B. Carroll's (1962) pioneering model for the prediction of success in instruction. Briefly, Carroll recognised that achievement in language learning depended on three clusters of characteristics of the learner and the learning situation: ability (he was particularly concerned with developing a test of language learning aptitude (J. B. Carroll and Sapon 1955, 1957), motivation, and opportunity to learn. In the behaviourist terms of the day, Carroll characterised these factors as the speed with which someone would learn, how long they would be willing to sit at the learning task, and how long they would be exposed to instructional material. In my book, I developed this as seventy-four conditions for learning, some of them necessary conditions but most typicality conditions contributing to the strength of prediction. The model recognised certain innate qualities (including the possibility of a biologically derived universal grammar basic to contemporary Chomskyan views of language acquisition) and added to the Carroll model a fourth factor specially relevant to second language learning, namely existing knowledge of the first language and what had already been learnt of the second. Knowledge of the first language was the basis for the interest in second language pedagogy in what was called contrastive analysis (Sajavaara and Lehtonen 1975; Spolsky 1979); previous experience learning a second language was also recognised as a major cause of difficulty: the notion of interlanguage developed (Corder 1967).

The conditions model then held that predicting future knowledge, skills, and proficiency in a second language depended on knowing the learner's present level of knowledge of the second language as well as the distance of the target language (its sound system, its lexicon, its morphology and syntax, its semantics and pragmatics) from the learner's own first language. (It will be noted that several of the papers at the conference focused essentially on comparisons of Japanese with languages of prospective learners: see Ando, Yoshioka and Eschbach-Szabo in this volume). The conditions model depended also on the learner's ability, including general intelligence, memory, acuity of hearing and vision, strategies for learning, and language aptitude which included specifically phonemic memory and syntactic sensitivity (J. B. Carroll and Sapon 1957). The third factor was motivation, derived from the learner's attitude to the language and to its speakers and varying in strength and in kind; a distinction being made between instrumental and integrative motivation (Gardner and Lambert 1972; Lambert 1969) and other desire for self-identity (Spolsky 1999) as expressed in language (The paper by Galan in this volume deals specifically with student motivations).

The final relevant factor was the amount and kind of input. The number of hours or days or months available for second language learning is clearly a major factor: the pressure to begin second language learning as early as possible or the use of intensive full-time programs to make up for a late start recognises this. There are a number of critical dimensions associated with input. Is it simply the unorganised exposure of the normal language use, or is it the highly structured presentation associated with formal language teaching (Ellis 2007)? Does it occur in a first, second, or foreign language environment? How does the audience (teacher, fellow students, and lay native speakers) react to learn output? Is the learner interacting with a human speaker or with a computer or other machine, or with a printed book? (See Eschbach-Szabo for a discussion in this volume).

While the conditions model did recognise some social aspects, if I were to rewrite the book now I would want to stress four major changes. The first would be to put greater emphasis on the social context of language learning: one does not so much learn a language as learn how to use a language for specific functions in specific social situations. The second would be to stress that language is more than an individual matter, depending fundamentally on constructive interaction with other people. I have noticed how my own fluency and proficiency in Hebrew depends on my interlocutor: I have one friend, a natural language teacher, with whom I speak most easily and from whom I learn most comfortably. The third would be to stress the complexity of motivation. From the beginning of Lambert's classic work (Lambert 1969; Gardner and Lambert 1972), interesting questions were raised about the difficulty of distinguishing instrumental from integrative motivation. How do you classify the motivation of someone learning a language in order to get a job working with speakers of the language? The issue of directionality (does motivation cause or result from proficiency) brushed aside early by Gardner has re-emerged as an open question (Spolsky 2000). Finally, there is the need to draw attention to the constraints on opportunity and output established by those controlling the language learning situation. An obvious example is the limitation of hours of teaching and the absence of limitation on the number of students in the class.

As I remarked earlier, I would start now not with pedagogical issues but with language education policy. Language policy, I suggest, has three major interrelated but independent components. The first of these is language practices: the actual functions and choices of language varieties making up the sociolinguistic ecology of the speech community. These choices, as Hymes (1967, 1974) showed many years ago and as Labov (1966, 1972) and a great deal of research strikingly confirmed, are not chaotic or haphazard but constitute a recognised set of patterns or rules established for a specific speech community. The sum of these choices, the features preferred, and the varieties into which these features cluster, constitute the language practices of a defined community, and implement the "real" language policy of the community. The second component consists of the beliefs (or ideology) of the members of the community – not what they do, but what they think they should do and why. The belief in the value and inevitability of monolingualism accounts for the difficulties of language teaching in the United States and also in Japan; the contrasting acceptance of multilingualism in India helps account for the corresponding individual plurilingual proficiency. The disdain for foreign languages or for specific stigmatised languages or varieties is similarly critical in explaining success or failure of language programs (in this volume, Carroll deals with Japanese attitudes to foreign speakers). The third component, and the one with which I am currently most concerned, is what I call language management – others call it language planning. Language management can be defined as efforts made by an individual or group that has or that claims authority over others to modify their language practices or beliefs. A nation that sets in its constitution a national official language just as much as a parent who tries to encourage a child to speak at heritage language are equally involved in language management.

Language management too divides comfortably into three related but potentially autonomous components. The first two were defined originally by Kloss (1966, 1969). One he called status planning, the determination of what specific functions a variety should serve within the speech community. The higher status is presumably to be the official national language of a nation-state, although sometimes this is challenged by a sacred function, the transmission of the sacred texts of an established religion. In Arabic-speaking countries, for example, Classical Arabic is constitutionally stated to be the official language, although most ordinary speech is in the local vernacular variety such as Egyptian Arabic or Palestinian Arabic, and an even higher status is preserved for the original language of the Qur'an. In Thailand, it is assumed that everybody speaks Thai, although most people do not know the official high variety (Smalley 1994). Struggles over status dominate the internal language policy of the European community. The efforts to replace Spanish by Catalan and Basque in the autonomous regions and to replace English by French in Quebec and by

Welsh in Wales are concerned with status. Another critically important function is use in the school system as medium of instruction.

Kloss labelled the second component “corpus planning” by which he meant modification of the form of language itself. Clearly, this is closely related to the first component, for a change in the status of a language and the other functions it is to perform regularly makes it necessary to modify its form. An official language (and a school language no less) need to be standardised (to have a grammar book and a dictionary) and to have a writing system. A school medium needs a modernised lexicon and greater elaboration if it is to be used at higher levels. Status and corpus planning then are closely related, and as Fishman (2006) has now shown, regularly have similar motivations.

The third component of language management was recognised by Cooper (1989) who called it language acquisition planning. It is basically a decision on which non-speakers of a variety should learn it, and is what I call language education policy. It ranges over a wide gamut from decisions in the home on the varieties that children should use through school language policies to governmental language diffusion policies. Our presence at this conference is thanks to the diffusion policies of the Japanese government, and one of the loudest complaints at the conference was the relatively low status accorded to Japanese language teaching in European schools.

With this rather lengthy theoretical introduction, I turn now to some remarks focusing specifically on Japanese language policy and on the teaching of Japanese in Europe.

Historically, Japan has been firmly monolingual and while it is clear that it has not been impervious to other cultures, whether the extensive influences from Chinese over the centuries or from the western world in the last century, there remains a strong tendency to resist recognition of actual multilingualism. There have been recent recognitions of minority languages like Korean (Lee 2002), international languages like English (Heinrich 2007), and even of indigenous dying languages (Maher 2001). Public signs in Japan give evidence of increasing multilingualism (Backhaus 2007).

There have been changes in Japanese language policy especially resulting from increasing international language migration (Taki 2005). Starting in 1939, 2 million Koreans and 40,000 Chinese workers were conscripted and brought to Japan, as were 200,000 prostitutes from Korean, China, and elsewhere. Over the next 25 years, there were some population and ideological changes and the myth of “ethnic homogeneity” began to prevail: Korean and Taiwanese immigrants became politically invisible. Starting in 1970, and even more intensively since 1990s, there has been a regular migration from many different countries. By 2000, 1.7 million foreign residents were registered with local government authorities. This posed a major problem for legal processes, as Japanese law requires that any Japanese be spoken during any investigation or public trial. The resulting language barrier was seen to threaten the validity of evidence. One attempted solution was to hire Court interpreters. By 2000, there were 3,400 police officers trained as interpreters, and 5,300 external interpreters were being hired. In the courts too, interpreters were being used, so that by 1997, interpreters were used in 85 percent of public trials involving foreigners in Japan. Efforts have also been made to improve the quality of interpreting and move the cost of providing interpreters to the public prosecutor. The election system has come to recognize the multilingualism of Japanese society.

However, the new Japanese education Minister has proclaimed again an isolationist mono-cultural policy of the kind that led to the excesses of Japanese imperial ambitions in the 1930s and 1940s (Katsuragi 2005). If this is restricted to language diffusion, well and good, but if it comes to block teaching of other languages inside Japan, one has reason to fear. At least the imperial enforcement of Japanese language on conquered peoples in Korea and Formosa has now been replaced by diffusion policy modelled on that of France and Germany.

But there are ideological problems, such as the presentation of the educated polite Japanese native speaker as the principal goal of teaching Japanese as Foreign Language (Heinrich 2005). While there have been changes in the use of honorific language in Japan Japanese as Foreign Language (JFL) textbooks continue to stress it (T. Carroll 2005).

Overseas, the teaching of Japanese depends on changing social context and economic reality. During the period of rapid Japanese economic growth in the post-war period, there was a natural increase in the demand for Japanese language teaching in many parts of the world. One thinks for example of the official recognition of Japanese as Foreign Language in Australian pragmatic language policies (Lo Bianco and Wickert 2001). The emergence of China as a major world economic power is posing a serious challenge to Japanese.

The teaching of JFL naturally varies in the different regions. In Japan itself, the focus is on Japanese for foreigners and immigrants. In Asia, where there are close economic contacts, its relevance is high. This is true of some Pacific nations. In Europe, the main motivation is economic, leading to a major European Union programme in the 1990s to train a small elite group of young business executives in the language. Programs in schools and universities tend to be small and to attract only a small number of enthusiasts.

Applying the conditions model to Japanese foreign language teaching in Europe, a number of critical issues become clear. The first concerns goals of instruction. The European Union now encourages its members to teach two foreign languages. The reason for this number is that in almost every country, English is completely established as the first foreign language; by requiring two foreign languages, it is assumed that there will be space in the curriculum for teaching other major European languages such as French, German, Spanish, and Italian. Japanese then must compete for the already limited position of a third foreign language, and to the extent that there is some acceptance of the need to teach Asian languages, it is presumably, competing with the growing status of Chinese. This means that it will remain an elite language, with presumably small classes and associated high expense. The question then arises as to whether to focus on basic or advanced mastery. Given Japanese attitudes to non-native speakers, there is considerable doubt as to the worth of basic teaching for communicative purposes – obviously, there is benefit to the learner in knowing something about a different language system, but a beginner cannot expect the same encouragement that a beginning speaker of Italian commonly receives. As a result, the difficult challenge of achieving high levels of proficiency seems inevitable.

Another question is whether to concentrate on teaching speaking or reading. It is not clear that this is really a choice, as witness the problems produced by United States acceptance in 1929 (Coleman 1929) of limiting foreign language teaching goals to reading and the need to develop intensive programs for the Armed Forces in the Second World War to provide some oral proficiency. Complicating this issue are the difficulties of teaching the Japanese written language (Galan 2005).

Understanding student motivation and adapting the teaching to it constitute another challenge. Most traditional language teachers, trained in the literature and culture of their language, prefer to adopt a cultural orientation to the teaching. However, a large number of learners have a strictly pragmatic or instrumental orientation: they are learning the language for some clearly perceived use.

The final group of issues arise directly from language education policy in the countries where Japanese is being taught as a foreign language. Essentially, the question is to provide an adequate opportunity for language learning. During the Second World War, American linguists who had been involved in the armed services training program (Spolsky 1995) attempted to persuade their universities to provide intensive foreign language programs in the first year (Cowan and Graves 1944; Pottle, Buck, DeVane and Hubbell 1944). None accepted this, but there was some agreement to provide a six-hour rather than a three-hour course in the first semester. Intensive programs were reserved for government-supported language training at the graduate level in select languages deemed to be in the national interest. The European Union programme for young businessmen learning Japanese followed this principle, but in most cases, the number of hours available for teaching makes it extremely unlikely that students will reach a satisfactory level of proficiency (see Galan in this volume).

Combining these two theoretical models to consider the teaching of Japanese as foreign language in European countries does not, I hasten to point out, produce solutions: what it does rather is to permit focusing on the fundamental problems crying out for solution.

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