

Exploring “Japanglish”: An Investigation into English Accent of Japanese and Language Ideology in Japan

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Abstract

Since the end of the Second World War, Japan has been keen on promoting English education and absorbing English loanwords into the Japanese vocabulary inventory. However, despite their frequent exposure to English, unlike many of their Asian counterparts, many Japanese still fail to attain English proficiency and their deviant English pronunciation is even often stigmatized. In light of this phenomenon, this capstone project aims to examine the English pronunciation patterns of Japanese and account for the patterns from phonological and sociopolitical angles in order to understand the development of English in Japan. The project interviewed and collected speech samples from five native Japanese speakers, who were all university students on exchange at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. Two participants have foreign education background while the remaining three have received education in Japan only. As the speech samples indicate, participants with foreign education background had higher accuracy rate and a more native-like accent, suggesting that living and receiving education in Japan could be a hindrance to English acquisition. Investigating into the language ideology of Japan, this project has discovered several reasons for Japanese people’s low English proficiency, for example, the influence of Japanese (L1), the monolingual nature of the Japanese society, and the inappropriate focus of the education system etc. The results imply that English is not essential in Japan and English acquisition in Japan is not well-designed. However, it is plausible that the new education reform driven by the 2020 Olympics and globalization can improve Japanese speakers’ English in the future.

Reflection

This capstone project is a summary of what I have learnt from my 4-year academic life as an English major. I have always found the development and interaction of languages fascinating. Fortunately, the English department has provided me with various well-planned linguistic courses that allow me to explore English, as well as Englishes in different regions, from the perspectives of different linguistic fields. Some people have argued that majoring in arts is pointless and impractical, but my opinion is just the opposite: studying applied linguistics enabled me to better comprehend the world. Other than the theoretical knowledge, the linguistic courses, more importantly, have made me rethink how the use of languages can be related to history, beliefs, politics, identity, and culture, which are all applicable to my analysis of English in Japan. This capstone project is an invaluable opportunity for me to make use of the linguistic knowledges I have learnt to conduct my own research on a new topic, and finally connect the theories to the reality. Lastly, I would like to take this chance to express my gratitude to my supervisor, Professor Jette Hansen Edwards, for enlightening me on phonology and language acquisition, as well as guiding me through this capstone project wholeheartedly.