

**Building Standards for Japanese-Language Education  
(tentative title)  
—Why Now?—**

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Strict socio-linguistic analysis aside, it is correct to say that Japan today is a mono-lingual society. However, a shadow is beginning to spread over the optimistic notion that our society can continue to exist using the Japanese language alone, a shadow cast by the more realistic expectation that society will soon not be able to function smoothly on the basis of a single language. This more sober assessment stems from one development: globalization. I believe that up to now, Japan has considered globalization solely as a deepening of international relationships in the sphere of politics and economics. For this reason, Japan now places even greater emphasis on proficiency in English—the world’s most frequently used medium of cross-cultural communication—as a tool for conducting affairs in economics and diplomacy. Indeed, Japan plans to introduce English-language education into primary school beginning in 2009. There are some private schools that are taking an even more radical approach, placing the focus on preparing students for advancement to prestigious Western universities, through immersion classes in English early in the primary grades. Many public schools, which emphasize English education, have also set up international departments and classes. But adopting uniform measures to improve English education by private and public school will, in either case, divert the many pathways of globalization toward a single vector which, as seen from Japan, only points outward. This obsession with English constitutes a somewhat narrow international perspective.

Globalization, however, does not simply mean mutual incursions into each other’s countries to pursue political and economic objectives. Increasing numbers of people regularly traveling across borders will affect the characteristic cultures and societies of other countries, generating a momentum that drives the transformation of individuals’ identity. Thus, the vector of globalization can be perceived as pointing in two directions, and adapting to globalization requires more than a single point of view. In other words, the most important characteristic of globalization is its effect of creating a larger international space and environment for the co-existence of cultures. This characteristic of globalization is most clearly exemplified by the international integration and harmonization of Europe. One method of advancing integration and cooperation in the broad realm of politics, economics and culture is promoting people’s mutual understanding and sharing policies and concrete measures for facilitating communication through language, which is the basis of this understanding. As it is taboo to question the superiority of one culture over another when cultures exist side by side, it is also taboo to question the

superiority of one language over another as a universal medium of communication. Recognizing this imperative, the Council of Europe put together a Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) for the more than 20 languages spoken in the region, in which it does not assign the status or role of a lingua franca to any specific language. Rather, the Council of Europe has selected the path of promoting multilingualism within the region and plurilingualism for individuals.

Japan today is not immune to the influence of globalization. While the country was clinging to the notion that its own internal globalization had meaning only in terms of external relations, within the country, in districts everywhere, the Japanese people were increasingly living side by side with foreigners, who now exceed two million, and the energy of this expansion of co-existence is palpable. Japan is now being shaken by major demographic changes, particularly a low birth rate and an aging population, and in order to maintain and expand its political and economic competitiveness, Japan will likely have to rely on foreign labor. The ongoing promotion of deregulation measures for opening domestic markets through free trade agreements and economic partnership agreements is undoubtedly an adaptation to this new reality. One would have to say that as the Japanese people increasingly share the same space with people who do not use Japanese as their daily language, there will be no assurances that Japan can maintain its status quo as a mono-lingual country. This is because it is expected that the more non-Japanese speakers Japan accepts in response to this internally-generated necessity, the more its international responsibilities will increase and the greater the pressure will be to monitor performance of these responsibilities. Consequently, Japan will probably no longer be able to function smoothly within the framework of a society that runs on a single language.

To approach this issue from a different angle, many Japanese alternate between feelings of inferiority and superiority toward other countries and cultures and are convinced that they speak a language which, because of its difficulty, is of a different nature from other languages. Oftentimes they casually make the excuse that the language they speak precludes them from studying foreign languages. Clearly, however, there is no scientific basis for this notion. Given the contrary fact that the number of people learning Japanese abroad has risen sharply with the tide of globalization, the Japanese must take a different view of their language. In the midst of globalization, English most likely will become even more of an international language. But, as advocated by UNESCO and other organizations and witnessed now in Europe, there is a new movement underway, one which regards the coexistence of many languages in society and the plurilingual capacity of individuals in an expanding international community that transcends national borders as a goal that, from the perspective of cultural diversity, has universal value. Something akin to this movement will probably soon emerge from the situation surrounding the Japanese language both in Japan and in other countries.

Given the expansion of Japanese-language education seen around the world, if we do not create an environment and systems that facilitate students' learning of Japanese, who else will be able to do it? The situations and domains where Japanese is used without actual contact with Japanese people are expanding around the world, though not to the same extent as with English,

and the Japanese language is gradually being released from the sole possession the Japanese people. In places everywhere around the world, multilingualism and plurilingualism are taking hold, and Japanese is surely becoming one tool to advance this process. This development has captured the interest of the Japan Foundation, which realizes that it has the responsibility to build an international standard for Japanese education and is aware of the public nature of this responsibility. Accordingly, the Japan Foundation has initiated a program of international round table discussions to study this issue. The first session was held in May 2005 under the theme “Building *Standards for Japanese-Language Education* (tentative title),” and to this date a total of three sessions have been held. Efforts to give concrete shape to these standards are an indication that we clearly perceive the true nature of globalization as it sweeps even further across Japan.

For the first session of this program, which was only partially open to the public, invitations were extended to researchers in language education policy and administrative experts from the US, Australia and Europe, where standardization and policy implementation for language education has already advanced, and from Korea and China, where Japanese is taught extensively. In this session, participants discussed the status and outlook concerning the standardization of foreign-language education. The Japan Foundation also requested advice and proposals concerning the philosophy and modality that should be adopted for its Japanese-language education standards. Based on the results of these discussions, the second session, a closed research conference attended by staff of the Japan Foundation and domestic experts, was held, in which basic principles were created under the name “Japanese for Mutual Understanding.” In addition, guidelines were prepared for building the framework of standards geared to the level of language utilization capacity, which is the basis of the “capacity to accomplish priorities” and “the capacity to understand other cultures,” and also geared to situation and context, using the “Can-do statements” prepared through CEFR as reference. In the third session—the first open to the public—mutual examinations and evaluations were once again performed by people involved from both Japan and overseas concerning the results of studies and the outlook for success, marking the first public step toward building these standards. This report outlines the course of these sessions and their accomplishments.

In the words of one author, “Language must simultaneously be preserved and adapted to new circumstances.” This observation hints at the present state of the Japanese language, now being reexamined by the Japanese at home but also attracting their interest for its use abroad, swept along by the wave ushering in a new global era.