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Linguistic Folk Theories and Foreign Celebrities of the Past

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Linguistic Folk Theories and Foreign Celebrities of the Past

Laura Miller

Introduction
One widespread notion found among many non-academic speakers of Japanese is that the language is exceptionally unique in its structure and use. From the 1970s through the 1980s, this ideology of linguistic uniqueness reached a high point of ethnolinguistic boundary maintenance, resulting in the publication and appeal of theories ranging from the benign to the bizarre. A consequence of language attitudes about uniqueness was the glamorization and marketing of foreign-speaking residents in Japan, some of whom became celebrities based solely on their ability to speak colloquial Japanese. In this essay, meant to add an additional layer of background in order to foreground the articles in this special section on the politics of speaking Japanese, I will mention a few of the folk beliefs about the Japanese language that still have currency. These folk theories are relevant because they shape the responses native speakers have when they hear non-standard dialects, world Japanese dialects, and the speech of non-native speakers. I will include a summary of the case of an unusual researcher named Tsunoda Tadanobu, who became famous for promoting the idea that Japanese brains are unique in how they process language. Finally, I will revisit the history of some foreign celebrities of the past in order to provide a context for thinking about the politics of speaking Japanese.

Popular attitudes about language
Speakers of all languages hold precious notions about the nature of their own language. For speakers of Russian, only those who have suffered are considered truly able to understand the soul of the language. For example, while doing research on Russian language acquisition in the former

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Soviet Union, I met instructors of Russian who told me that their American students may have grammatical competence, but that because they lacked a history of suffering, they would never truly understand the language (Miller and Ginsberg 1995). This is an aspect of the ideology called russkaia dusha, which is part of a nationalistic discourse that links cultural attributes such as vodka drinking, steam baths, suffering, and language with Russian ethnic identity (Pesmen 2000). Similarly, an ordinary opinion found among people in Japan is that their language is particularly unique in its structure and use, an idea common not only in folk linguistic views, but in a few scholarly accounts put forth by educated writers as well.

All cultural groups select features to highlight as symbolic of their identity and polity, so the case of Japan is not at all unusual. Although religion, clothing style, music, food culture and other traits are also called on to mark ethnicity, language is the primary feature used to “enact, celebrate and ‘call forth’ all ethnic activities” (Fishman 1977: 25). In the case of Japan, many attitudes and ideas about language may also be considered an aspect of a wider essentialist discourse often called nihonjinron “theories of the Japanese.” Scholarly exegesis of this ideologically-informed genre has by now been thoroughly explored (Befu 2011, Sugimoto 1999). Gottlieb captured the essence of nihonjinron thinking and language when she stated:

> Within the Nihonjinron framework, Japan is portrayed as linguistically homogeneous (i.e. Japanese is the only language spoken there), and the Japanese language itself as a uniquely difficult and impenetrable barrier even for the Japanese themselves, let alone others. In this view, race, language and culture are tied together and cannot be separated (Gottlieb 2005: 4).

What are some of these common folk beliefs about the Japanese language found in nihonjinron writing and beyond? A few of the popular ideas related to Japanese language structure or tied to sociolinguistic aspects of language use include the following:

- It has the most complex honorifics and greetings (aisatsu).
- It has complex address terms (words for self and others), unlike other languages.
- It values empathy and indirectness in speech, while other languages do not.

There is an immense literature on these attitudes and beliefs that were promoted during the 1970s and 1980s in writing by Japanese language scholars. One illustrious academic was surely Kindaiichi Haruhiko (1913–2004). Kindaiichi (1957, 2010) continues to be admired by new generations of readers. His original work was published in Japanese in 1957, translated into English in 1978, and reissued yet again in 2010. Many enduring folk theories are found in his book Nihongo no tokushitsu (Special Qualities of the Japanese Language), in which he asserts that Japanese is foremost among the unusual or unique languages of the world (Kindaiichi 1981). He also insists that the Japanese language values empathy and indirectness in speech, while other languages do not.

Notable in regards to this last idea is also the scholarship of Takie Lebra (1976), who makes similar claims about the unique role of empathy and indirectness in the Japanese language in her book Japanese Patterns of Behavior. Another influential writer on the Japanese language who continues to be read by new audiences is Suzuki Takao (1926–). His claim that Japanese has complex address terms (words for self and others) unlike other languages, and that Japanese has the most complex honorifics and greetings (aisatsu) continue to be part of popular discourse largely because of his accessible writing style (Suzuki 1975a, 1975b), as well as the English translations of his work that are reissued (Suzuki 2001).

Although the views listed above are deeply entrenched, when we compare the Japanese language with other languages in the world, there is little evidence to support them. A few of these folk beliefs have been debunked or challenged (Miller 1994, 1995a, 1998), so I will focus on only a few popular beliefs. One way to approach claims about linguistic uniqueness is to consult studies that contrast language structures for many languages. There is now an enormous body of scholarship on comparative descriptive linguistics, so it is possible to empirically examine the ideas in this list. Two that are especially captivating are that Japanese is more complex than most other languages, and that having the verb at the end of the sentence is somehow unusual. It turns out that these beliefs do not accord with what we know from linguistic research.

A few years ago some enterprising researchers decided to construct a database of a few thousand world languages that could serve as a
resource for comparison. The result is the massive World Atlas of Language Structures, a large database of structural properties of languages (Dryer and Haspelmath 2013). The data for the World Atlas of Language Structures was compiled by fifty-five scholars who targeted information about a language's structural properties (phonological, grammatical, lexical), as well as other information. They collected material on 2,676 languages and coded for almost two hundred different linguistic features, including word order, the type and number of phonemes, how sentences are negated, and which languages have politeness distinctions in personal pronouns.

The database reveals, for example, that many languages have a special question particle that is tacked onto sentences in order to change them from declarative sentences into questions. When linguists describe and classify languages according to the way they make questions, it is based on the underlying ideal abstract linguistic structures, not on how languages are used in everyday speech. In actual conversations speakers of numerous languages, including Japanese, might omit question particles or other structures that mark the statement as a question and instead let the context or intonation do the work. The database compilers called these types of questions "polar questions," which means they may be answered with the equivalent of a "yes" or "no" response. The database also looked at where in the sentence these question particles occur when found in polar questions. For example, in Mandarin the question particle ma, in Wappo (a Native American language once spoken in California) the question particle ha, and in Japanese the question particle ka, all occur at the end of the sentence.

1. Mandarin
   Ni shì zhōngguórén
   Are you Chinese?
   Ni shì zhōngguórén ma.
   You are Chinese.

2. Wappo
   te ce? mi ek'a
   He is your son.
   te ce? mi ek'a ha?
   Is he your son?

3. Japanese
   Kimura-san wa gakusei desu.
   Mr. Kimura is a student.
   Kimura-san wa gakusei desu ka.
   Is Mr. Kimura a student?

Among the 884 languages coded for this structure in the World Atlas of Language Structures, 529 of them have question particles, while 355 (including English) do not. Most of the 529 languages that have question particles place them at the end of the sentence. Japanese is therefore one of the more typical types of languages for this feature.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Position of question particle</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Question particle at beginning of sentence</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question particle at end of sentence</td>
<td>314</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question particle in second position in sentence</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question particle with other position</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question particle in either of two positions</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No question particle</td>
<td>355</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>884</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Languages with question particles. Source: Dryer 2013a.

Before going further, recall the list above of traits about the Japanese language that many people believe, and consider the idea that "The verb is at the end, so it is very unusual." Linguists are always looking for ways to analyze and classify languages in order to make meaningful comparisons. There are several schemas available, such as classification by the historical roots and affinities (language families), by the nature of the sound system, or by morphological characteristics. Among the first efforts at thinking about classifying languages by their basic syntactic elements, we find studies by Joseph Greenberg (1963). Entitled "word order typology," it is a type of classification based on the order of syntactic elements in declarative sentences. Using a small database of thirty languages, Greenberg discovered some startling things about the relative order of elements in the languages in his data set. By only looking at stripped down, basic elements, he found three that are universals: Sentences have subjects, verbs, and objects. Logically there are six possible word orders of these three elements in a transitive sentence: VSO, VOS, SVO, OSV, OVS. Here is a table that gives examples of what these might look like if in English.
When Greenberg put together this data set, he found that some of the word orders are extremely rare (OVS, OSV), while two are extremely common (SOV, SVO). Japanese is classified as an SOV language, while English is an SVO language.

(4) English:  
I eat breakfast.  
S V O

(5) Japanese:  
Watashi wa asagohan o tabemasu.  
S O V

Leaping forward now to our database from the World Atlas of Language Structures, which confirms Greenberg’s main findings but now with many more languages forming the data set, we find that the frequency of the six possible word orders provides a distribution that looks like this:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language Type</th>
<th>Number of Languages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SOV</td>
<td>565</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SVO</td>
<td>488</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VSO</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VOS</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OVS</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OSV</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No dominant order</td>
<td>189</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1377</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Frequency of word order types. Source: Dryer 2013b.

There are other scholars who have created similar studies, and while their numbers are somewhat different, all of them confirm that the most common pattern found for word order among languages is SOV, followed by SVO. In other words, Japanese word order (SOV) is one of the world’s most common, and is actually slightly more common than English word order (SVO). As mentioned above, the classification of languages by word order typology in linguistics is based on their underlying ideal abstract structures, and not on how they are used in everyday speech. We find that in conversation speakers of many languages omit material that can be inferred from the context. When the subject is omitted the linguistic term for this type of language is “pro-drop” or “pronoun-dropping” language. Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, and Turkish are all examples of pro-drop languages.

Finally, we come to the last belief from the list above, that Japanese is one of the most unique languages in the world. Researchers at the World Atlas of Language Structures worked with an analyst named Tyler Schnoebelen (2013) to compare 239 languages statistically to see how like or unlike they were to one another. With an intentional irreverent zest (thus, they are fully aware of how “weird” calling it a “weirdness index” might appear), they created the “Weirdness Index,” based on twenty-one rare or unique linguistic structures or features. For example, going back to our list of word order frequencies, we find that because most languages are either SOV or SVO, the other word orders would be coded as unusual traits. In their scheme “weirdness” refers to those outlier traits that diverge from what is typologically average. We note that the resulting list of “World’s Top Ten Weirdest Languages” does not include Japanese. Heading the list is a language spoken by fewer than 6,000 people in Oaxaca, Mexico.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Language, Region</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Mixtec (Chalcatongo), Mexico</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Nenets, Russia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Choctaw, North America</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Diegueño (Mesa Grande), California</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Oromo (Harar), Ethiopia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Kutenai, North America</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Iraquí, East Africa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Kongo, Angolá</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Armenian (Eastern)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>German</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4. “World’s top ten weirdest languages.” Source: Schnoebelen 2013.
It might be constructive to acknowledge this fascinating data because it points to one of the problems we have when talking about the relative typicality or weirdness of language, one that partially accounts for why people claim that Japanese is a difficult or unique (or, weird) language. If we are only comparing two languages, that is not a good data set. In addition, there seems to be an English-centric standpoint involved that assumes that languages that deviate from English (which is number 33 on the Weirdness Index) are somewhat odd. Additionally, people routinely confound language with its writing system. There's no doubt that Japanese language uses a complex writing system, but writing systems are found in a different domain of discussion. All languages are complex, although the complexities are varied and different. A language learner will find unrelated languages more difficult to learn, but this is a separate issue from claims about linguistic complexity that supposedly resides in the language itself. Nevertheless, despite what linguists say, many Japanese continue to believe that their language is extraordinarily unique. An intriguing example is the uncommon career and popularity of Tsunoda Tadanobu. His thinking was extensively influential in mass consciousness, so is useful to review as background to our discussions about the politics of speaking Japanese.

The Specialized Language Brain in Japan

Tsunoda Tadanobu was an ear, nose, and throat researcher who published a bestselling book in 1978. Entitled *Nihonjin no no: Nō no hataraki to tozai no bunka* (The Japanese Brain: Brain Function and East-West Culture) (Tsunoda 1978), the book was a massive success and went through numerous reprints. It was also translated into English with some modifications, and published as *The Japanese Brain: Uniqueness and Universality* (Tsunoda 1985). At the time of the book’s publication, Tsunoda was a professor in the Department of Auditory Disorders at the Medical Research Institute of the Tokyo Medical and Dental University.

Tsunoda began testing auditory receptive responses by means of his own unusual procedure, a protocol he called the “Cerebral Dominance Key-Tapping Method.” This entailed the use of a tape-recorder, a headphone set, and an electric key pad. The subjects, wearing headphones and seated in a chair, tapped the key in a prescribed rhythm. The subjects had to be trained to use the apparatus properly during the experiments. In the usual course of brain research, there are different methods and dissimilar findings than those that Tsunoda reported. Subjects should normally not have this sort of direct control of their own testing. Tsunoda (1975) first presented some of his data in the journal *Brain and Language*. Aside from the small pool of subjects, the dubious method of having subjects essentially test themselves by pressing on an electronic key while receiving an auditory stimulus was attempted by other scientists, who failed to replicate any findings at all (Cooper and O’Malley 1975; Hatta and Dimond 1979). Meanwhile, other Japanese scholars not part of scientific disciplines felt that, although Tsunoda's methods may have been non-standard, because they supported the idea that the Japanese language is unique, they had merit. For example, a review that appeared in a reputable publication, *The Journal of Japanese Studies*, claimed that Tsunoda’s work had “Nobel Prize-winning” potential (Makita 1979).

In the days when Tsunoda carried out his experiments, subjects in brain research would have typically had electrodes placed on precise areas of the scalp, and there would be nothing like the sort of self-methodology he employed. In any case, although Tsunoda began these tests as a way to diagnose patients with auditory disorders, he soon began experimenting on normal subjects, including himself, as a means for lending support to some of the most prevalent *nihonjinron* ideas of the era. He began with the premise that the Japanese language is very unique, and set out to lend scientific support for this idea. His theory was that, although Japanese and non-Japanese possess the same morphological brain structure, the neurophysiological functions of the brain have developed differently and become completely dissimilar.

For example, according to Tsunoda, Westerners (seiyōjin) perceive calculations and consonants in the left hemisphere but music, humming, insect sounds, birds chirping and other sounds are processed in the right hemisphere. On the other hand, in his thinking, Japanese perceive both vowels and consonants in the left hemisphere of the brain, where they also process humming, insect sounds, birds chirping and other natural sounds. He suggested that Japanese are closer to nature because of better awareness and sensitivity to its sounds, evidenced by the existence of onomatopoeic words, such as *shito shito* for the pattering of rain, or *sara sara* for the trickling of water in a stream. He often asserted, in his writing and in interviews, that Westerners do not really hear these sounds, but that Japanese people do because of their specialized brains. He said:
People in Japan are often tempted to believe that this feeling of relaxation they derive from listening to these insects is traceable to some kind of special sensitivity resulting from the “unique” Japanese culture. To have found the explanation of this Japanese “uniqueness” in the brain dominance pattern was greatly exciting, and for several days I was enthralled by the idea of a strong inter-relationship between the brain and culture with language as the medium (Tsunoda 1985: 78).

It should be emphasized that Tsunoda never suggested that the Japanese brain is superior, or that the difference is genetic. Rather, he skirted this issue by saying that the brain develops in a different way because of the “unique” nature of the Japanese language. Unfortunately, this subtlety often got lost in his subsequent inferences about what the differences in brain development means in terms of culture. Tsunoda believed that his findings supported other nihonjinron stereotypes. He believed that the hemispheric difference in the brain mirrors the philosophical difference between “logos” and “pathos,” which he said are combined in the Japanese brain but are in separate hemispheres in all other human brains. The consequence, according to Tsunoda, is that Japanese lack logical thinking but are superior at empathy and intuition. Furthermore, he believes that thinking in English is decidedly unhealthy for Japanese people. Tsunoda’s experiments allegedly had relevance to language learning and teaching. He concluded that when Japanese people use other languages, it imposes too much of a workload, creating an excessive imbalance in the brain’s hemispheres that will stiffle their right brain insight. Tsunoda even suggested that Japanese fall asleep at international conferences where English is the official language because it taxes their brain functions.3

Moving from his original role as an otolaryngologist, Tsunoda vamped into a respected brain researcher in Japanese mass media. But his strangeness within the world of actual science is hard to ignore. An extension of his original research program aptly illustrates that he was not in the mainstream of scientific research and thinking. Tsunoda felt that the difference in brain hemisphere dominance that he claimed to have discovered could also be shown by presenting subjects with the smell of alcohol, or else by having them masturbate. He tested 14 Japanese, five Westerners, and one Korean, asking the men to masturbate before and after his Key Tapping test (Tsunoda 1985: 89–92). Unlike his claims concerning language, these other aspects of his research program were apparently ignored in nihonjinron discourse.

Tsunoda’s work falls into the realm of pseudoscience, along with Phrenology, Scientific Creationism, and Dianetics. So why bring it up? His combination of pseudo-neuroscientific claims and folk-theoristic linguistic assumptions were unquestionably given a positive reception by a mass audience. Tsunoda remained in the public eye and was frequently interviewed for decades after his book came out. He appears in unexpected places as an expert on Japanese people and culture. For example, his perplexing brain testing apparatus are featured in a short vignette in the film Sukiyaki & Chips: The Japanese Sounds of Music (Marre 2003). The filmmakers wanted Tsunoda to discuss his ideas about how the brains of Japanese process music differently from all other
peoples. They interviewed him in his lab where his white lab coat and the imposing machinery of science lent weight to his statements that Westerners can’t understand traditional Japanese music because of their non-Japanese brains. The Japanese editor and publisher of a monthly English magazine penned a laudatory essay urging readers to attend to Tsunoda’s research, claiming that “[i]t is our duty as Japanese toward the rest of the world to make a conscious effort to study the Japanese language brain that we have inherited in order to make better use of our natural creativity” (Ishizaka 2002). As late as 2006, Tsunoda was interviewed in The Japan Times, where he said:

Japanese communication is more of an exchange of feelings than of information. Our conversation is more like animal sounds, like two birds singing to each other. Ours is not as logical a language as others. Japanese are wasting their money and time learning foreign languages. It is inefficient and confusing for Japanese children to try a foreign tongue before the brainstem’s switching mechanism is completed at about age nine (Kawaguchi 2006).

His ideas are provocative but not related to any legitimate scientific findings.

Given the public discourse about the uniqueness of the Japanese language, and the apparent substantiation from putative scientists such as Tsunoda, it should not be surprising that encounters with foreign speakers of Japanese in past eras presented something of a shock.

Foreign Language Performers
One consequence of folk linguistic attitudes about the uniqueness of the Japanese language was the exoticization of foreign-speaking residents in Japan. Some observers of the phenomenon theorized that it was merely fascination with foreigners that led to this interest. But the fact that they were foreigners was not what made them objects of entertainment, but that they were speaking Japanese. Making stars out of foreigners who are speaking Japanese, and have no other ostensible talent, marks linguistic competence as something rare, and as an amazing achievement (Miller 1995b). These linguistic clowns became known as gaijin tarento (foreign celebrity). Recently there is media and other avoidance of the term gaijin, and many people prefer to replace it with the non-contracted form gaikokujin (person from a foreign county). Because gaijin was not always considered a pejorative label during the years I am discussing, I retain its use in this essay. 

By the 1980s, a small group of resident Japanese-speaking foreigners regularly appeared on Japanese television. Among the earliest crop were a handful that stand out. They not only made frequent appearances on TV, but were interviewed in print media and served as barkers for products and services in advertisements. I remember a magazine for married women that featured a photo of one of the male gaijin tarento in his Japanese bath with his daughter, and another of a female star sharing her recipe for the American hamburgers she made for her Japanese spouse. Four of the foreign celebrities from the United States and Canada stood out as particularly ubiquitous: Kent Gilbert, a Mormon missionary turned lawyer and actor; Chuck Wilson, a professional body builder; Kent Derricott, a Mormon missionary turned actor, consultant, and author; and Dave Spector, who started out as an American program scout. Spector had the most staying power and success as a professional foreigner, commentator, producer, and author, and still puts his face in from time to time. Although the four of them often appeared together in TV programs and in advertising campaigns, this forced grouping masked the reality of their rather different backgrounds and attitudes. Behind the scenes Spector was not shy about disparaging the others, as in one interview in which he said, “Look, the other two guys [Kent Gilbert and Kent Derricott] are Mormons. Talk about a warped look at life. I mean, these guys don’t keep up with what’s going on. And Chuck (Wilson) has been here since the Korean War. Come on. I’m the only one they can understand. People from Utah don’t count” (Brown 1989).

During the time I lived in the Kansai area (1977 to 1981), people often mentioned Edith Hanson (1939–), an actress and TV personality known for her fluency in the Osaka dialect. Later, she served as the director of Amnesty International Japan, and currently lives in Wakayama. Although seen infrequently in mass media after 1978, she was nevertheless in people’s minds as a premier example of a Kansai-dialect speaker who predated the other foreign celebrities. An American news story may have overstated her appeal when it claimed she was “a tall, willowy 35-year old Oklahoman whose name, though unknown in the United States, is a household one throughout Japan” (Times-News 1974: 3). Hanson was the author, for a short time, of a column in the weekly magazine Shukan bunshun, as well as several books. Her first book Katakoto eigo de jibun desu (Broken English is Sufficient) (Hanson
1969) was followed by many others. She appeared in many Japanese films and TV programs, including her first major role in a film entitled Aoi me no hanayome-han (My Wife Has Blue Eyes) (Kawazu 1964). [see Image 2.] As late as 1993 she continued to be the object of featured interviews in such newspapers as the Mainichi shinbun.

Although I heard Hanson’s name often, no one ever mentioned an earlier postwar foreign celebrity, an American woman named Linda Beech (1925–2012). Beech was a beautiful white woman with blue eyes who might have been imagined by the Japanese public (and the American public as well) as an ideal blonde American of the era. She is somewhat reminiscent of Grace Kelly, an embodiment of the global fantasy of the white princess who was prominent in Japanese media in the years before Beech was launched into local stardom. Beech was a cast member on a Japanese sitcom that aired on Radio Tokyo TV (now TBS) titled Aoi me no Tōkyō nikki (Blue Eyes Tokyo Diary, Horie and Kondō 1958–1959) which aired from April 1958 to May 1959. It was another tale about a blond American woman living in Japan—perhaps the role later created for Hanson was modeled on this earlier program. Beech played the role of the wife of an American journalist living in a Japanese-style house. Her family experiences cross-cultural difficulties, bonking their heads on low doorways and mistaking a hibachi (charcoal brazier) for a flower pot. A later version of the program, with the slightly different name Aoi me no Nippon nikki (Blue Eyes Japan Diary, Kinotōru, Miki, and Maeda 1959) was on air for less than a year, from June 4, 1959 to October 1, 1959. Evidently, one of the other main American actors disappeared so they had to change the storyline. Beech acted in another TV drama named Uchi no Okusan tonari no mama-san (My Wife and the Neighbor’s Wife, Yonemura 1961–1962) that was produced by Yomiuri TV but broadcast on Nihon Terebi from 1961 to 1962. In this one she plays herself as a member of one of three adjacent households.

Beech was the subject of many short American news pieces (Carey 1958a, 1958b), and one journalist dubbed her “the Zsa Zsa Gabor of Japanese television” (Independent Star-News 1958: 77). She herself wrote essays (language unknown) for weekly entertainment magazines such as Shūkan myōjō (1958–1991), as well as an essay for a special issue on television for the magazine Shūkan asahi in April 1959. Beech is also listed as a cast member in a few films, including Sazaesan no...
The hyperbole found in English language reports about her work and popularity in Japan obscures some unanswered questions. For example, most accounts state that she learned to speak Japanese from her family's second generation Japanese American maid in Hawai'i, so we might therefore wonder about the issue of the Nisei/Hawai'i dialect she learned, and how it was received by speakers of other Japanese dialects once she was in Japan. Beech had an unusual life, eventually returning to her native Hawai'i where she is said to have earned a Ph.D. in psychology and became something of a local eccentric who lived in a tree house.

Predating both Beech and Hanson is yet another Japanese-speaking foreign performer. The Australian-born rakugo storyteller Henry Black (1859–1923) was once a celebrated foreigner who performed in earlier times (Morioka and Miyoko 1983; McArthur 1992, 2004, 2013). Black began his public stage life as a narrator of European tales in low-brow theaters (yose), eventually entering a rakugo guild for training in 1890 at the age of 31. He adopted the professional name Kairakutei Burakku (Pleasure Black). His status as a foreigner was evidently one reason for his fame, and news reports often commented on his hair color and non-Japanese background. In an interview Black noted, “They said a Western rakugoka [rakugo storyteller] would be unusual, so I quickly became very popular” (McArthur 2008).

**Conclusion**

The objectifications of foreigners in Japan became a method for creating self-definition, partly achieved by contrast with a presumed “normal” Japanese person. As Suzuki Satoko notes in this special section, the commodification of foreigner speech also may be tied to shifts in nationalistic sentiment. The foreign celebrities were reflexive symbols against which Japaneseness could be created and evaluated. Gaijin tarento were marketed and exploited for novelty value in the same manner as other commodities. For the most part, after the mid-1990s, Japanese speaking foreigners ceased being quite the novelty they once were.

However, a YouTube video entitled “But We’re Speaking Japanese!” (Neptune and Tanaka 2014) depicted a pretend scene in which a group of frustrated foreigners try to order food in a restaurant in Japan, but are stymied by a waitress who is incapable of processing that they are speaking Japanese. She insists on addressing her questions to the one person present who does not speak Japanese, a bewildered Asian American woman. The video elicited a range of responses from viewers: some long-term foreign residents in Japan saw the vignette as an absurd, antiquated, and exaggerated profile that is thirty years out of date. Other commentators thought the scene was fairly accurate of their own experiences, such as the Japanese Americans living in Japan studied by Takamori (described in this special section). Long-time foreign residents in Japan, however, report much less push-back than in the past, perhaps partly to do with their having acquired more appropriate non-verbal manners and body language.

The interpersonal experiences inflated in videos such as “But We’re Speaking Japanese!” are replicated all over the world, and are not unique to Japan. In his essay on being a Mandarin-speaking white man who lives and teaches in Taiwan, Friedman (2012) reported on what happens when ethnic Chinese people must deal with the challenge of interacting with a non-Chinese person. Some strategies he noted include panic, use of a type of “foreigner talk” (employing a parody of a foreign accent), disbelief, a baby talk register, deflecting talk to the nearest Asian-looking person, and insincere complimenting. All of these strategies have been reported for the Japanese context in the past. One difference may be that the foreign speaker of Mandarin is less often made into a media celebrity.

A danger in writing about issues of language and national identity is that commentary may easily be interpreted as a form of Japan-bashing. Suzuki Satoko (this issue) outlines the shifts in language ideology that correspond to changes in nationalistic sentiment. Perhaps Japan’s recent evolution into neo-nationalism is starting to have an influence on the perception of younger Japanese-speaking foreigners. Even so, it is probably true that the increased number of foreign residents in Japan has resulted in fewer of the challenges and strategies that were once so common, even while some people continue to put foreign speakers of the language to work for ideological purposes. More insidious, in my view, are the folk theories about language that underpin interactional strategies and foreigner-commodification. The continuing prevalence of these ideas
is a type of “cultural distillate” (Weakland 1971: 239) that provides a key to understanding commonly shared concepts about national identity.

NOTES

1 There are other interesting databases, such as Ethnologue (Lewis, Simons, and Fennig 2014), which contains statistics for 7,106 languages and dialects. For scholars of Japan, it is a good resource for learning about dialects of Japanese as well as the many Ryukyuan languages, and Ainu.

2 A good history of the concept as well as recent research in word order typology is found in Song 2012. See also Comrie 1989.

3 Roy A. Miller (1982) expressed his disregard for Tsunoda’s ideas in a raw and seething tone that academics usually avoid, so his mean critique became buried in reactions to his prose style.

4 Tim Ernst was a cartoonist who moved to Japan in 1981, and soon began using his status as a foreigner as inspiration for a regular comic strip first published in the Mainichi Daily News from 1984. Collected and published as small books (one sports a cover blurb by gaijin tarento Kent Derricott), the comics often depict language troubles (Ernst 1987, 1993). Ernst says that the first newspaper he approached did not approve of using the word gaijin, so he took the concept to the Mainichi Daily News where it was accepted (Budmar 2014).


7 Rakugo has been an attractive path for many foreign performers up to the present. One rakugo artist on stage since 1998 is a British woman named Diane Orrett, who uses the stage name Daian Kichijitsu (Diane Lucky Day). Originally from England, she lives in Osaka and performs as a balloon artist and rakugo storyteller in both Japanese and English.

8 An exception is the white Canadian Mark Rowswell, a Mandarin speaker who goes by the stage name Dashan. By all accounts he is a well-known media personality.

REFERENCES


In the late 1990s, amidst governmental initiatives for men to take paternity leave and social yearning for men to be more involved in domestic activities such as child rearing, an all male reality TV show appeared. Junjō gakuen otokogumi (Academy of Devotion: Men’s Team, henceforth JGO) aired on Asahi Broadcasting from September 5, 1998 through June 26, 1999. The show’s premise was to take everyday (naïve) Japanese (Kansai) boys and turn them into men. Using slapstick comedy, stereotypical masculine behavior, and masculine linguistic features the audience comes to understand that turning boys into men means creating men who are tough, assertive and competitive. Indeed, JGO explicitly combines humor, regional linguistic features, and stereotypically masculine language (and actions) which produces a style of masculinity that is firmly situated in hegemonic masculine norms of the recent past rather than presenting a style of masculinity that is forward looking and potentially more domestically inclined. Drawing on one particular episode of JGO, this article focuses on two issues: the use of a traditional style of humor (boke and tsukkomi) and gendered language by a non-native speaker of Japanese, Kunna Dasb. Specifically, I examine how the use of masculine and regional linguistic features by Kunna serve to include or exclude him from claiming an Osaka (Kansai, Western Japan) identity.

Japanese is well known to be a gendered language, both grammatically and stylistically. The creation and codification of a “Japanese Women’s Language” in particular has been documented and