

Monolingual Assumptions under Pressure – Perspectives on the languages of Tokyo from the points of view of the economics of language and social psychology

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Japan is a country with a traditionally strong monolingual self-image. In the last decades, however, linguistic heterogeneity has been steadily increasing. This is especially true for Tokyo, where about 40% of all resident foreigners in Japan live. The different languages of the capital will therefore be in the focus of our interest. Research will be conducted on the basis of two methodological approaches developed, respectively, in the economics of language and social psychology. The one will look at the language market in Tokyo, i.e. the different languages spoken there and their respective value in terms of supply and demand as reflected, e.g., in the local language industry. The other will investigate the language attitudes of the receiving end of immigration, the Japanese host community in Tokyo. Questions to be approached are such as how the Japanese think about other languages; how language attitudes are affected by Japan's incipient multilingualism; and how increasing linguistic pluralism is perceived in the Japanese community.

1 Introduction

Linguistic pluralism, like ethnic diversity, has often been regarded as a source of community unrest and social instability (Pattanayak 2001, Calvet 1998, Nelde 1997, 1980). For a long time, Japan's ethnolinguistic homogeneity has been an undisputed component of her self-image, often quoted as a major factor which both makes Japan a classical nation state and secures harmony, social consensus, and stability. In modern times, there has never been any doubt that Japan's proper and only language is Japanese, in contradistinction to many postcolonial countries. In recent decades, however, the monolingual assumptions entertained by the government and the overwhelming majority of the population have come under pressure, as a steady influx of labor migrants have begun to change the face of Japanese society. This is especially apparent in Tokyo which, like all metropolitan cities around the world, is in some measure multilingual. While conforming to a general trend driven by cross-border labor migration and the forces of globalization, Tokyo's growing linguistic diversity offers a unique opportunity for multilingualism research, since, at the present time, a language arrangement long taken for granted is being adjusted to changing communication needs. The mechanisms of these adjustments and their consequences for perceived and actual stability is what we are trying to understand