

Vladimir M. Alpatov

ON JAPANESE LINGUISTIC MYTHS

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There are many myths connected with the language in Japan. This situation is conditioned by historical causes, among which the insular location of the country is the most important. The myths were very widespread in the past but some of them are preserved until now.

There is no such numerous, socially significant and having so long script tradition language which would be so isolated as Japanese. This fact influenced the linguistic notions of Japanese very significantly.

It is acknowledged now that the Japanese people formed in the first centuries A. D. by the confusion of the primordial population which apparently spoke an Austronesian language with Altaic tribes invaded from the continent. This branch of the Altaic peoples became isolated from the other Altaic world, adapted itself to the not-Altaic geographical condition and mixed with the primordial Austronesian population. The result of this confusion is Japanese. This language was considered as hybrid by some researchers, but S.A. Starostin (1953-2005) established its Altaic attribution [Старостин 1991; Starostin, Dybo, Mudrak 2003]. I consider his point of view convincing. The new language preserved the basic grammar and vocabulary but partly changed the primordial structure especially the phonetic one: the sound structure of Japanese is unlike the Altaic one. There was the Ainu language too but the contribution of it to the forming of Japanese is not significant. The influence of Ainu on Japanese is comparable with the influence of the American Indian languages on American English: it is significant only in the sphere of the geographical names.

The subsequent history of Japan had some peculiarities that also influenced the linguistic consciousness. The Japanese people preserved its identity and the main territory during two thousand years; the only exception was spreading of the Japanese to the north at the expense of Ainu up to the XIX century (The main part of Hokkaido was inhabited by Japanese people only in the Meiji era). A particular situation took place on the Ryukyu islands but this territory was always the periphery. There was no expansion of the Japanese to the continent up to the XIX century except the invasion to Korea in 1592-1598 and there were no invasions to the Japanese islands up to the middle of the XX century except two unsuccessful attempts of Mongolians in 1274 and 1281. Japan is one of few Asian countries which did not run into the problem of the protection of its language from the languages of the colonialists [Gottlieb 2005: 18]. The contacts of the Japanese with the other peoples were occasional up to the XIX century and the peoples who had maximal contacts with Japanese spoke languages that were significantly different from Japanese (Chinese, later English). The contacts of Japanese with the Altaic languages except Korean did not exist (so as the contacts with the Austronesian languages) and the contacts with Korean were significant only in the first centuries of existence of Japanese and then in the XX century.

The language situation in Japan was very stable during two millenniums, that situation is very rare in the world. The primordial Altaic and Austronesian languages disappeared many centuries ago, the place of Ainu was peripheral and immigrant communities did not exist in Japan till the XX century. It does not mean any complete

linguistic homogeneity: there were many dialects in Japan (the term *hoogen*, literally *side language*, became widespread since the late Middle Ages, it was perceived as the equivalent of the term *dialect* since the time of Europeanization). However all its speakers considered themselves Japanese people. Every linguistic formation existed on the Japanese islands since Nara period (VIII century) to the present was considered the form of the same language: Japanese. Such idea was formulated by the national *kokugaku* scholars in the XVII-XVIII centuries. This language was named *kotoba* ‘language’ up to the Meiji era, then the special term *kokugo* ‘country language’ appeared (the word *nihongo* ‘Japanese language’ is less widespread, it is the only possible word if they say about its mastering by foreigners). In the opinion of one Japanese linguist *nihongo* and analogous names of other languages have an objective meaning but the meaning of the word *kokugo* is subjective: it means “our language”, native language [Haga 2004: 33]. .

One more peculiarity of the language situation in Japan consisted in the fact that the old written language (*bungo*) was used only by the Japanese people. This fact distinguished these languages from the other functionally similar old written languages (Latin, Old Church Slavonic, Sanskrit, Classical Arabian, Written Chinese and so on) which were international languages. The national linguistic tradition formed in the XVII-XVIII centuries based upon *bungo* and was purely Japanese too. There was the Japanized Chinese *kambun* too but it had some difference from Written Chinese.

Nevertheless in several epochs the influence of other languages on Japanese was significant. First of all it was the influence of Chinese in the first millenium A. D. especially in the VII-X centuries and the influence of English and partly of the other Western languages in the XIX-XXI centuries. However this influence had some peculiarities. Firstly, this influence was not imposed from outside (except partly the period of the American occupation in 1945-1952), the Japanese themselves selected all that was necessary from other languages.

Secondly, Japanese is different from the majority of languages from the point of view of the structure of borrowings. Usually borrowings do not form any particular subsystem of languages, and any strict borders between primordial words and adapted borrowings do not exist (English is a partial exception: the difference of German and Roman words is appreciable). However Japanese consists of three subsystems: the subsystem of primordial words (*wago*), the subsystem of Chinese words (*kango*) and the subsystem of borrowings from the Western languages especially from American English (*gairaigo*, or *katakanago*). Three subsystems differ in their phonetic and grammatical features and have a tendency towards semantic differentiation. Nowadays one of two Japanese alphabets – *katakana* – is used first of all for the writing of the Western borrowings. The borrowings are numerous but they are estimated as solitary subsystems of the language and their existence does not prevent considering the Japanese language as the primordial component of the Japanese culture: this culture has many borrowed components but the language is the most important from the primordial ones equally with Shinto. The Japanese are distinguished by mass interest for the linguistic problems but mainly it is only the interest for their own language.

Such conditions gave birth to some stable linguistic myths which are inherent in the mass consciousness and penetrate into the Japanese science and even into the foreign science. One American specialist wrote that a feature of many Japanese publications is blending of science with folklore [Johnson 1993: 96]. These myths have been studied by

some Western specialists [Miller 1982; Dale 1986], their estimation of them are very negative. However it is worth objective investigation.

1. The uniqueness of Japanese. One of widespread and stable myths is the myth about the uniqueness of the Japanese language. This myth spreads both to the peculiarities of its development and functioning where it has some reasons which are grossly exaggerated and to its structure where the mythology is evident.

For instance the well-known sociolinguist Suzuki Takao writes that there is no one country except Japan where one people live on the same territory protected by the sea and speak the same language during 1500 years [Suzuki 2006: 19-20]. In his opinion “Beowulf” is not a wholly national English literary monument for the English people because this language changed significantly after the Norman conquest but “Manyooshu” (Japanese monument of almost the same time) is “our” monument for the Japanese people [Suzuki 2006: 150]. Haga Yasushi thinks that the national languages formed only in the last centuries in Europe but Japanese became the national language much earlier [Haga 2004: 30]. Above-mentioned peculiarities and the lack of significant ethnic minorities in Japan up to the XX century gave birth to the idea: it is the same to be Japanese and to speak Japanese. Maybe this idea is the cause of comparative small aspiration of Japan for internationalization of Japanese [Алпатов: in print]. The question of the recognition of Japanese as one of the language of UNO was raised only once at the end of the 1980th but it was soon removed from the agenda [Gottlieb 2005: 74]. Now this question is not discussed.

Of course the stability of the Japanese language situation and the ethnical homogeneity in Japan are not usual. However firstly we should not transfer the modern notions of nation and nation language to the ancient times. Secondly the Japanese situation is not absolutely unique, compare for instance Iceland. Thirdly the situation became different in the last decades: the immigrant communities in Japan number about 2 million people now.

The Japanese national self-consciousness formed by the opposition to China and then the West. It treated the language too: the *kokugaku* school realized the particular features of Japanese in comparison with Chinese and Sanskrit and emphasizes the advantage of Japanese which was discovered in the small quantity of sounds. Nowadays the most remarkable structural peculiarities of the Japanese language for its speakers are that features which distinguish it from the Western languages especially from English. Japanese authors take notice constantly that the distinction of language, race features and predominant religion between Japan and the other countries of “the Seven” or “the Eight” is more significant than such distinction between any other members of it. Suzuki Takao writes that the majority of languages, cultures and religions are cognate and only we, the Japanese are lonely [Suzuki 2006: 73-74]. It is evident that Suzuki as many other Japanese authors compares the Japanese only with Christian people of white race who speak Indo-Germanic languages and reduces the world to seven or eight developed countries (sometimes with addition of China). In particular the Japanese did not think about the resemblance of Japanese with the other Altaic languages. Even the Japanese word-order can be considered unique although such word-order “subject – direct object – verb” (SOV) is the most widespread among the languages in the world although the word order of the majority of the European languages (and the Chinese language) is different.

On the whole emphasis and exaggeration of the uniqueness of the Japanese language and the Japanese culture is one of constant features of the Japanese notions on

the world [Moeran 1989: 15].

2. Complication of Japanese. Another myth is the notion of the peculiar complication of Japanese; sometimes they say that a foreigner cannot master it. Of course they say only about Western people (such ideas were not used when Japan imposed Japanese in Korea and in the other conquered countries at the first half of the XX century). The well-known Japan-American linguist Shibatani Masayoshi devoted a part of his Japanese grammar to the disclosure of this myth [Shibatani 1990: 89-90]. It is possible that the source of this myth dated from the time of the American occupation or even from the earlier time: almost all the American people who visited Japan (especially members of the occupation administration) did not try to learn Japanese. The complication of mastering of some aspects of this language (especially the Japanese script) is evident too. For instance one day I talked in Japanese with educated Japanese and said about my specialization in Japan. Then I began to read a Japanese newspaper but this man was very astonished: he did not think that foreigners could read in Japanese. It was the evident influence of the language myth which is supported by some authors of publication on the so-called *nihonjinron*, literally *science on Japanese people*. The myth is alive in spite of many disproving examples.

An additional idea is the idea about the peculiar richness of Japanese because there are many synonyms in it; these synonyms are primordial lexical items and numerous borrowings from Chinese and English. Shibatani Masayoshi criticized this myth too [Shibatani 1990: 89-90]. Indeed many meanings can be expressed by three words: *wago*, *kango* and *gairaigo* (or two of them). However some stylistic differentiation takes place in the most cases: *wago* are colloquial or neutral, *kango* are bookish and *gairaigo* are connected with the prestige consumption or with the high technologies. However the rich synonymy is the property of any language with the developed system of functional styles. The idea of the peculiar lexical richness can be proved or disproved by statistical investigations but authors of publications of *nihonjinron* avoid them.

3. Culture of silence. Furthermore the Japanese linguistic myths emphasize the inclination of Japanese people to silence, non-verbal means of the transmission of information. For instance Haga Yasushi writes that the Japanese do not like the verbal transmission of all the information, they do not trust the oral language and are not inclined to any verbal explanation [Haga 2004: 104, 260]. Takemoto Shozo declares that the Western people are too talkative from the Japanese point of view because they use language as a weapon but the Japanese got accustomed to implying the information as far as possible because they communicate with each other as members of one large family [Takemoto 1982: 267]. “Cult of silence” is reflected even in Japanese proverbs or nowadays in publicity [Hayakawa 2001: 42]. Even some Western authors except this myth and consider Confucian sources of this ideal [Dale 1986: 79].

Of course the ellipsis exists at every language: speakers omit the information which is clear from the context. Japanese has some opportunities of ellipsis which are unusual for speakers of Western languages. For instance the developed system of the forms of politeness (*keigo*) in Japanese gave significant opportunities of omission of personal pronouns; the agglutinative character of the Japanese case markers permits to omit them but it is impossible to omit the inflected case endings of the Western languages. Thus this myth has a grain of truth too but this grain is exaggerated. Besides it is right that the rules of the Japanese society demand to be silent with members of the