



The analysis of *kokugo* concept and language ideologies in Meiji Japan

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Main points

- 1. Discussing relationship between the concepts of *nation* and *national language*
- 2. Discussing language ideologies in Meiji Japan
- 3. Proposing a theoretical model for explanation of the relationship between *language* and *nation*

Nation and national language (*kokugo*)

Scholars of *kokugo* ideology:

- NATION = pre-existing entity the movement that inspired the movement for the creation of "national language"
- The urge to "nationalise" seen as primary cause of change
- **Essentialist outlook on NATION**

Benedict Anderson:

- NATION = *imagined community*
- LANGUAGE = pre-existing entity that causes nations to emerge
- **Essentialist outlook on LANGUAGE**

Language / Nation

- Nations and languages are dialectically co-constructed and arise in tandem
- Both *language* and *nation* should be treated as "imagined" and constructed ideological concepts

Language

- A constructed ideological concept
- The idea of linguistic enumerability and singularity, in other words, the very concept of discreet and countable languages cannot come before vernacular standardisations.

Language ideologies in Japan

- Language questions in Japan had already been present at least throughout the Edo period (1600—1868).
- The so-called 'nativist' school or *kokugaku* (国学) with Motoori Norinaga (1730—1801) as its pinnacle
- Meiji period: *neo-nativists* (新国学)

- **Ueda Kazutoshi** — introduction of western linguistics into Japan
- Adoption of modern scientific methodology
- Ueda defined language as the 'spiritual blood of the nation'
- This concept was thoroughly rooted in the ideas of German Romanticism, particularly of Herder and Humboldt, that have ideologically connected language to nation.

Criticism of modern *kokugo* scholars

- Ueda Atsuko:
- Discursive conditions by which *kokugo* became possible in the period preceding Ueda-led reforms
- The emergence of *kokugo* in fact negotiated with the proliferation of *kanbun kundokutai* (漢文訓讀体) style of writing in the 1880s

Key points in language ideas in Japan

- In pre-Meiji *kokugaku*, particularly in Motoori Norinaga, we already have the idea of a written 'pure' Japanese language without 'foreign' elements, which can be seen in Norinaga's attempt at phonetically transcribing the ancient text of *Kojiki* (古事記).

➤ In 1866, before the Meiji Restoration began, Maejima Hisoka submitted to the shogun his *Kanji onhaishi no gi* (漢字御廢止之議, 'The argument for the abolition of kanji').

➤ The idea, that a written language is only a representation of a spoken language gave birth to the movement in Meiji period, called *genbun itchi* (言文一致) or unification of spoken and written language.

➤ Language reforms:

➤ Limiting the number of *kanji* (漢字)

➤ Use of phonetic *kana* script (表音式仮名遣い)

➤ In favour of adopting Roman alphabet (ローマ字)

➤ Genbunn itchi (言文一致)

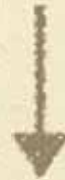
Apparent ideological contradictions

➤ The popularity of *kanbun kundokutai* in newspapers, textbooks, fictional works and compositions

➤ The arguments for language reforms — whether it be the Roman alphabet, *kana* scripts, or *genbun itchi* — almost always targeted **kanji**, **kanji compounds** and **kanbun** for criticism.

Analysis

➤ In the context of the dominant ideological view, these forces were not opposing at all



➤ PHONOCENTRISM was already present within the *kokugaku* of the eighteenth century, which saw its ultimate expression in Motoori Norinaga who contrasted the *Nihon shoki*, written in Chinese characters, with the *Kojiki*, which appeared to preserve the spoken language of ancient Japan

➤ The buds of **nationalism** appeared first and foremost in Japan in the movement to privilege phonetic writing within the Chinese character cultural sphere, a situation that was far from unique in Japan, since with respect to the forming of nations, the same problem has emerged all over the world and thus a historical consideration of the case of Japan should look at the problem from a more universal perspective.

➤ The ideology of phono-centrism brought into existence ethnicities and races which had previously been unrelated and therefore nonexistent.

➤ With the conceptualisation of vernaculars as *languages* on par with classical languages, it became possible to bring together ideologically the actual linguistic diversity of speakers but, at the same time, conceive language as a homogenous system that belongs to all individual of that imagined linguistic group.

➤ Arguments for the reform in the Meiji period (rejecting *kanji* and *kanbun*)

Versus

➤ Arguments for traditional orthography and increasing popularity of *kanbun kundokutai*.



➤ In reality both these opposing views actually sought to sever the past from the present.

Conclusion

- Dialectical process in which nations and languages emerged can be interpreted as the process in which phono centric view gave birth to the idea of vernacular conceived as language on par with classical, written, sacred languages, which helped form the concept of a unified linguistic community and therefore the idea of a nation, while on the other hand the hegemonic ideology of nationalism started to shape all following ideas of language no matter how conflicting they appeared on the surface.