

Japanese Language on Saipan: Some Research Topics in the Northern Marianas for Japanese linguists

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1. Introduction

This paper attempts to identify some potential research topics for scholars of the Japanese language on the Northern Marianas Islands, particularly Saipan. I consider three large topics: (1) Japanese language retention (or conversely, attrition) and usage of elderly islanders educated during the colonial era, (2) words of Japanese-origin used in Chamorro, and (3) the current state of Japanese language education on the islands. The questions here are based on research topics I attempted to identify during an exploratory trip to Saipan in December 2002. I was able to make another research trip to Saipan in March 2004, but this paper does not incorporate information gained on that trip.

2. Japanese usage by elderly islanders

The first set of topics are historically the oldest, and arguably of the greatest theoretical importance. These relate to issues of language retention (or conversely, language attrition) among elderly speakers today who were educated during the Japanese Mandate era. I will outline various aspects of this topic below.

2.1. Similarities and differences with the Japanese remaining in Palau, Yap, Chuuk, Ponape, etc.

For decades Japanese scholars were afraid, because of the unpleasant political and social implications, to approach the topic of Japanese language use in the former colonies (Taiwan, Chinese Manchuria, the Korean Peninsula, the League of Nations Mandate territories including the current polities of the Commonwealth of the Northern Marianas Islands, and the Federated States of Micronesia). From the 1990's a handful of scholars of Japanese (including both Japanese and non-Japanese individuals) began to conduct fieldwork with the aging populations of these regions, with the attitude that regardless of what had happened in the past, it was the responsibility of those in the linguistic sciences to document and analyze it. Saipan and the rest of the Northern Marianas Islands (mainly Rota and Tinian) have not been surveyed up to now. Because of the wealth of recent scholarship on the other former colonies, comparative studies

with the CNMI are possible. These will undoubtedly yield fruitful knowledge regarding the Japanese language (and the various local languages involved) in specific, but also may well shed new light on more general theoretical issues such as the processes involved in second language (L2) retention and L2 language attrition.

2.2. Interlanguage features

The issue of language retention does not simply imply what linguistic features (words, morphosyntactic rules, etc.) speakers still remember and which they have forgotten, but also how they have altered the target language – how their usage of Japanese differs from the Japanese used among native speaker communities. Interlanguage features which developed in their Japanese a half century ago may have become fossilized.

2.3. Influences of (interference from) Chamorro when speaking Japanese

One of the great contributions of research since the 1970's into Interlanguage is that we now know that language learners' mistakes are not always random but often have patterns or "rules". Another is that we know their mistakes are not categorically the result of interference from their native language. This is not to deny, however, that SOME (perhaps many) characteristics of the L2 learner's language are traceable to his/her first language (L1). By studying the Japanese used by Chamorro speakers, and then by comparing this to the Japanese used by L1 speakers of Korean, Taiwanese, various Austronesian languages of Taiwan, Palauan, Trukese, etc., we can determine which characteristics are unique to the Chamorro. Analyzing the unique features of Saipan Japanese may indeed tell us as much about the Chamorro language as it does about Japanese.

2.4. Differences in the Japanese of Chamorro and Carolinians

Chamorro is of course not the only language used on the Marianas; about a quarter of the population are the Refalawasch, or Carolinian, people. They too were educated under the Japanese administration and differences in the Japanese used by them and by the Chamorro people may provide insights not only into social (or sociolinguistic) differences between the two groups at the time, but also into linguistic differences in two languages as well. Chamorro and Carolinian are both members of the Austronesian language family, but from two different branches of this large family tree. Chamorro is a Western Malayo-Polynesian language, while Carolinian is a Micronesian language belonging to the Eastern Malayo-Polynesian branch.

2.5. Sociolinguistic relationships between retention (attrition) rates and post-war contacts

Ethnicity is not the only factor we can imagine for varying degrees of Japanese language retention. In the half century since the Japanese administration ended, some Saipan residents have had little or no contact with native Japanese speakers. Others, those working in the tourist industry, for example, would conceivably have higher rates of retention, and fewer fossilized interlanguage features, but this is only a working hypothesis which needs to be tested.

2.6. Use of Japanese as a lingua franca

For decades it was said that not only did people in the former Japanese colonies still remember their Japanese and use it when coming in contact with native speakers, but that some even continued to use Japanese on a daily basis when coming in contact with neighbors whose native language differed from themselves. Now we have documentation that (at least a few) Austronesian speakers in Taiwan use Japanese as their everyday means of communication with the Sino-Taiwanese or with speakers of different Austronesian languages. We have similar evidence for communication between Yapese and Ponapean or Trukese speakers. An obvious question arises here. Are there elderly speakers of Chamorro and Carolinian who find it more comfortable to communicate with each other in Japanese than by using one or the other of their native tongues or a third language like English? What about the language used between these speakers and Koreans of their age group, whether they be residents of Saipan or tourists to the island?

2.7. Use of Japanese as an in-group language (argot) in front of Guamanians

Older Saipanese who grew up learning Japanese are aware that the Guamanian Chamorro do not know Japanese. Thus they would be able to use Japanese as a secret language to communicate among themselves in the presence of Guamanians. In fact, while the author was in Saipan (December 2002, March 2004), he heard several reports that this does indeed happen and for this reason. The opposite is also feasible under certain circumstances.

2.8. Language Death (Language Attrition) Processes

General, universal, theoretical issues in the theories of Language Acquisition and Language Attrition: As mentioned above, there are potentially more far-reaching implications of research into how well Saipanese people remember Japanese. Just as the past half-century has taught us that the learning or acquisition of a language is a complex process in with many similar

phenomena seen across different languages, so the past few decades have taught us that the forgetting or losing of a language is not a random and instantaneous occurrence but indeed a complex process. Some research has been done (and much more lies ahead for the future) into language death (work pioneered by Nancy Dorian) at the community and the individual speaker level.

2.9. Possibility of a “South Seas” dialect of Japanese

Overseas varieties of Japanese have been identified and described. There are said to be enough identifiable characteristics of the Japanese spoken in Hawaii to justify the label “Hawaiian Japanese”. Similar claims have been made for Brazilian (See Yui 2003). We would have no reason to assume that the Japanese spoken on Saipan was identical to the Japanese used on Palau or Ponape; on the contrary, these islands are all geographically distant enough that contact among these speakers is rare and they are all parts of different political entities, and all use different languages. But on the other hand, the native languages of these islands – while vastly different from each other and mutually unintelligible are nonetheless all members of the Austronesian language family and thus share some structural similarities. These structures could have had an influence on the Japanese spoken by people who learned it as their second language and similar structures may have produced common characteristics in the Japanese spoken throughout the greater Micronesia region. In other words, just as we can talk about Kansai Japanese, Hawaii Japanese and Brazilian Japanese, there may be an entity we can call “South Seas Japanese.” We would expect the influence of Austronesian mother tongues to appear in syntactic and lexicosemantic areas. This is a working-hypothesis name for a variety of Japanese which is (1) unique to this region, and (2) has identifiable common characteristics in spite of internal variation and (3) has evolved to fit the lifestyles of these areas and the linguistic needs of the people living there. Moreover, to coin a term like “South Seas Japanese” and posit it as a language variety, the Japanese of these various islands would have to be significantly different from mainland Japan varieties of the language.

Lexically, the Japanese of many of these islands appears to share features with Ogasawara Japanese. These commonalities stem largely from similarities in lifestyle. For example, variations of the Japanese *haichō* are found in current use throughout this region even though the word is virtually unknown in the Japan of today. The word describes a wooden hutch used to store non-spoiling food with screen rather than glass in the doors and sides to allow air to pass through and keep insects out. In this case, the object itself has disappeared in Japan even though

it is still in use in these island societies. There is a related phenomenon as well, in which the object is still current but the word in Japan has changed while these islands still retain the old word. Their lack of contact with Japan has prevented them from acquiring the new term as it spread throughout Japan. I term this an “Urashima Tarō effect” (after a Japanese Rip Van Winkle-type character). Similar effects are found in more isolated parts of the United States such as Appalachia where words, like *yonder* and *vittles*, which have disappeared in England have survived.

In the Ogasawara Islands today, one finds words as *chichibando*, a word for brassiere which has been replaced by *burajaa* in Japan, and would sound old fashioned there (Long and Hashimoto 2004). Similar examples of this effect are reported in Hawaiian Japanese where words like *shashinki* (more commonly *kamera* in today’s Japan). The word *chichibando* has entered the Ponapean language as a loanword, pronounced *sisipando*. This leads us to our next topic, Japanese loanwords used in greater Micronesia.

3. Japanese-origin borrowings on Saipan

Topics related to this “Urashima Tarō Effect” are to be found not only in the Japanese of the greater Micronesian region, but in the Japanese loanwords which have become a part of the languages of this region (Long 2003). There are interesting cases in which the form of the word or its meaning has changed. Examples of change in word form are found in the various derivations of the early 20th century Japanese word *katsudō shashin* (meaning “moving pictures”) which has been clipped (as well as phonologically altered) to forms such as *kachito*. So here the word is no longer current in Japan, and has changed in form (by clipping) as well.

An example of the Urashima Tarō Effect combined with a change in meaning is found in the word *sarumata*, which is an outdated word for men’s long underwear. The word has not fallen out of use in Saipan Chamorro; it has entered that language as a loanword. It has evolved in meaning, in fact doing a 180 degree turnaround. In modern day Chamorro, *sarcomata* refers to women’s panties.

A similar phenomena is found in Japanese loanwords in United States English. *Taikun* (which referred to the Emperor in 19th century Japanese) is no longer in use in Japan, but it has survived in the United States, where it has morphed into the term *tycoon* meaning not a ruler but a rich businessman.

3.1. Japanese loanwords in Saipan Chamorro

What kinds of words have entered Chamorro from Japanese? A look at the semantic fields covered by these loanwords reveals something about the sociohistorical nature of the contact which facilitated the borrowing. Preliminary studies of Japanese loanwords in Micronesian languages have revealed that these words relate to agriculture, new (at the time) technologies, sports, clothing, tools, Japanese social system and social constructions (*haikyuu*).

Other questions may be posed. Are there any Japanese words in Guam Chamorro that entered the language variety through contact with Saipan Chamorro? In other words, are there Japanese loanwords which Guamanians have picked up from their Saipanese counterparts?

3.2. Japanese loanwords in Saipan Carolinian

As I have mentioned earlier, Chamorro (that is, the Saipan variety of it) has many loanwords of Japanese origin. The question arises then, what about Carolinian? Does Saipan Carolinian have Japanese loanwords as well? Are they the same ones as in Chamorro? Did the words enter Carolinian directly from Japanese, or did they enter via Chamorro? A quick look at a Carolinian Dictionary suggests that there is much work to be done here.

3.3. (Un)awareness of the Japanese origin of the loanwords

When I was in Saipan, I asked several people to tell me Japanese origin words which had entered the Chamorro language. Occasionally words they listed as such were NOT Japanese. This indicates that Saipan Chamorro speakers are not completely aware of which words are from Japanese and which not. This fact has multiple implications. One is that Chamorro do not necessarily know which words are from which language. Younger speakers may thus mix Spanish, German or even indigenous Chamorro words when trying to speak Japanese. Similar things happen in Japan when Japanese people try to speak English and inadvertently mix in non-English loanwords like *arbeit* (from German).

3.4. Japanese loanwords in interactions between Guamanian and Saipanese Chamorro speakers

Three topics come to mind here relating to the use of Japanese loanwords in interactions between Chamorro speakers from Saipan and those on Guam.

First, the presence of the great number of Japanese-origin words in Saipan, combined with the fact that many speakers are not conscious of the Japanese origin of these words surely result in a lack of comprehension when Guamanian Chamorros communicate with their Saipanese

friends and relatives.

Second, it serves to reason that communication with Guamanians and those people's failure to understand certain words (i.e. those of Japanese origin) in the speech of Saipanese speakers serves as the mechanism for their first realization of the origin of such words. In other words, we would expect to find Saipanese Chamorros saying things like "I just got back from Guam they didn't understand words like X, Y and Z. Hey, that must mean those words are Japanese."

Third, realizing the incomprehensibility of such words to Guamanians would make them useful to Saipanese Chamorros for ingroup communication (cant or argot) purposes. Above, I mentioned that elderly Saipanese could speak the Japanese language to keep secrets from Guamanians, but middle-aged and younger speakers who do not speak Japanese could similarly pepper their Chamorro with Japanese loanwords.

4. Current situation of Japanese language education on the island

At present the ability to speak Japanese is an economic asset throughout the world, but especially in Asia and the Asian Pacific including Saipan. During an only four day visit, I encountered numerous islanders who either expressed pride in their ability to speak Japanese, or who expressed the desire for such ability. A local dive shop operated by Japanese divers for a Japanese clientele advertises proudly that their single non-Japanese guide (who incidentally is neither Chamorro nor Carolinian, but Filipino) can not only speak Japanese but also read and write it. This just goes to show the importance placed on Japanese language skills in Saipan. In spite of the demand for Japanese language skills here, there is little information describing the state of Japanese language education on the island.

The following issues are of interest. Where is Japanese taught on Saipan and in what manner? The author learned that there is a Japanese as a Second Language instructor in the Northern Marianas College. Is this the only place to receive formal instruction? Are there private Japanese language schools? Do Japanese resorts and other companies that cater to a Japanese clientele have Japanese language classes for their local employees?

A quick perusal of Japanese language materials (texts books, dictionaries, word cards) on sale at the college and private bookstores revealed only English medium materials, but some additional information is needed regarding the language of teaching. Is English used as the medium to teach Japanese to Chamorros and Carolinians? Are these languages ever used as the medium of explanation? Do Japanese language learning materials written in Chamorro exist or

are they deemed unnecessary because almost everyone understands English?

There are important question of teachers and teacher training. Is Japanese taught only by native speakers from Japan or do elderly people who learned Japanese during the colonial days use their skills to teach younger islanders? Is there any teaching training on the island or do Saipanese come to Japan if they want to become teachers of Japanese?

Motivational and language usage factors should be examined as well. What are the goals of today's Japanese language learners? Do they learn the language for use in order to communicate with Japanese tourists or with Japanese living and working on Saipan? Do learners think it increases their chances for getting a job at a Japanese business on Saipan or do they desire to come to Japan to work or further their studies?

5. Conclusion

In this short exploratory paper, I have attempted to outline some issues relating to Japanese linguistics on Saipan and to group them typologically. These issues are important for linguists working on Japanese as well as those doing Carolinian and Chamorro. They have clear significance for filling in the linguistic details of the turbulent history of 20th century relations between these societies. Their importance for the future of the two cultures is also self evident, both in the realm of language education and cultural understanding as well as the economic benefits that such relationships facilitate.

Bibliography

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