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# Language Myths and Misconceptions

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## 言語に関する作り話や思い違い

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2008年度春学期の「言語と社会」の最初と最後の授業では、学生は言語に関して19問の○×方式の問題が与えられた。この19問の問題すべては事実ではなく、作り話や思い違いであるべきものであり、春学期の授業内容の主要点が含まれていた。学期最後の授業での31名の答えによると、問題の大部分は作り話や思い違いとして受け止められていた。しかしながら学生の過半数は5つの問題(26%)を事実として認め続けていた。その中の3つは70%以上の学生に事実として認められていた。これは言語学者が言語の仕組みを広く知らせる努力をしても特定の永続的な作り話や思い違いは存続することを主張している。

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**Key words:** Language, Language Myths and Misconceptions, Linguistic Prejudice, Language “Corruption,” Japanese

“Young women speak rougher now than they used to” (今日の若い女性達の話し方は以前の若い女性達の話し方より乱暴である). “Young people nowadays can’t use honorific language correctly” (今の若い人達は敬語が正しく使えない). “Women talk more than men” (女性は男性よりよく話す). “Recent language changes, such as *-reru* for *-rareru*, are not good” (「～られる」から「～れる」のような最近の言語変更はよくない).

Despite having spent a semester in the course *Gengo to Shakai* [Language and Society] examining these and other language myths, misconceptions, and prejudices, a survey at the end of the spring semester 2008 showed that these four continued to be supported by a majority of students in the class. For example, 77 percent of students still accepted the idea that young women speak “rougher” now than in the past, while 71 percent continued to believe respectively that young people today use Japanese honorific language incorrectly and that women talk more than men. Fifty-eight percent also continued to condemn “recent” language changes such as the shortening of the potential/passive *-rareru* to *-reru* (termed “*-ra nuki*”) in such verbs as *tabereru* instead of *taberareru* (“can eat”/“be

eaten”).

People know their native language intuitively, but they tend to have very little analytical knowledge of it, or of language in general. This is one reason why language teachers argue that being a native speaker is not in itself a sufficient qualification for teaching one’s native language. Because native speakers have rarely had the opportunity to analyze their native language, they seldom have a clear understanding of how the language works beyond the intuitive level. This lack of analytic insight into how one’s native language—and language in general—operates may be one of the reasons for the continuation of widespread myths and misunderstandings about language such as those mentioned above.

In their book *Language Myths* (1998), editors Laurie Bauer and Peter Trudgill caution that just as you would ask an engineer rather than a commuter how a train works, “if you want to know how language works you should ask a linguist and not someone who has used language successfully in the past” (p. xvi). However, as they admit, linguists have generally “not been good about informing the general public about language” (p. xv). The results of the survey in this study are mixed in that respect: many of the myths and misconceptions in the survey appear to have been corrected by the end of the course, but a small number persisted. This indicates that still more effort is needed in order to dispel language myths and misunderstandings that are firmly entrenched in the public’s mind.

## Method

In the first class of the course *Gengo to Shakai* [Language and Society] students were given a list of 19 statements about language and asked to indicate whether they thought the statements were true or false. The statements had been translated into Japanese from English (see Appendix). Taken together, the statements reflected most of the main topics that were to be dealt with in the course. After students had marked their answers, the first class period was spent giving a brief explanation of what was false about each statement. Some statements were unequivocally false, such as “Japanese is the only language of Japan,” because Japanese Sign Language, Ainu, and arguably Ryukyuan are indigenous languages separate from the modern Japanese language.

Other statements were at least partially false, such as the previously mentioned “Recent language changes, such as *-reru* for *-rareru*, are not good.” In this case, evidence was presented to show that there are recorded instances of “*-ra nuki*” as far back as the Meiji Period, so that regardless of one’s personal preference concerning this specific language change, it is not “recent.” Whether still other statements were true or false was shown to be a matter of opinion or of individual preference with no

objective way to satisfactorily prove the statement true or false, such as again the “*-ra nuki*” issue as well as statements such as “Kyoto Japanese is the most refined kind of Japanese” or the aforementioned “Young people nowadays can’t use honorific language correctly.” Concerning this last statement, the problem of objectively determining what “correctly” means was pointed out, as well as the fact that what is considered “correct” can change over time. Changes in honorific language use itself can render what is considered “correct” honorific usage somewhat variable over time.

At the end of the semester, during their final examination, students were once again given the same list of statements. Their answers had not been collected or recorded during the first class, and a pre/posttest type of analysis was, therefore, not possible. However, by merely asking students during the first class how many thought each statement was true or false, it became clear that a substantial number of the students considered most of the statements true. This outcome was actually welcomed, because the rest of the semester was to be devoted to debunking these and other language myths and to giving thorough explanations of why they are false. In addition, a very similar list of statements had been used for a number of years in the first class of this course, and a similar show of hands had revealed very similar results.

A total of 31 students returned the list of statements at the end of the 2008 spring semester final examination. The results were compiled and are reported below.

## Results and Discussion

Looking at the results in descending order from those myths and misconceptions that had been most successfully rejected to the ones that were still most accepted, two statements on the list were judged to be myths by over 90 percent (90.3%) of students by the end of the course: “Aboriginal languages like Ainu are more primitive than Japanese and English and are inadequate for expressing concepts in the contemporary world” (アイヌ語や他の先住民の言語は日本語、英語等より単純な言語で現代の世界を表すために不十分な言語である) and “Standard language speakers don’t have an accent” (標準語を話す人はなまりがない). In fact, only three students still accepted these statements as valid.

Concerning the myth that aboriginal languages are primitive, Winifred Bauer (1998, p. 83) points out that “language A may have more complex systems than language B in one area and less complex systems in other areas” but “all languages have immensely complex grammatical systems.” Using the example of aboriginal Australian languages, Evans shows in another essay how the complexities of aboriginal languages “have played an important role . . . in extending our notions of what complex organizing principles can be found in human languages” (1998, p. 167). In an on-line article (2006,

para. 5), David Shariatmadari states the point unequivocally: research into linguistic universals “has left us able to say with some confidence that no one language (and for that matter, no dialect of any language) is more or less capable of expressing the gamut of human emotions and experiences than any other.” Creoles (pidgin languages that have become the first language of a group of speakers) also show the same complexity as all other human languages. As Shariatmadari concludes: “To put it a different way: there are no ‘primitive’ languages.”

In addition, only three students still believed that standard language speakers do not also have an accent. On this point, Esling well expresses the view of the linguistic community when he says, “The fact is that everyone has an accent” (1998, p. 169). In another statement about the standard language, eight students (27%), however, still accepted the myth that standard Japanese is more correct than regional dialects (日本語の標準語は方言より正しい日本語である).

The relationship between the putative standard variety of a language and other dialects of the language continues to be the source of misunderstanding and prejudice. The fact is that a standard variety is merely one variety of a language that has been elevated through historical circumstances to become the prestige dialect of the language. Those circumstances may have been political, economic, geographic, etc., but they most likely had nothing to do with the actual “superiority” of that variety over any other. In fact, as Bauer and Trudgill (1998, p. xvii) and many others have emphasized, “all languages and dialects are complex and structured means of expression and perception.” No one dialect is inherently better, or more “correct,” than any other in purely linguistic terms.

However, in social and political terms, some varieties are “better” than others. Thus, it is beneficial for all speakers of a non-standard variety to be “bilingual”: fluent in the standard variety that they learn in school in order to function effectively in the broader society, and also fluent in their native variety, which is the “correct” and “proper,” even “superior,” variety in its own contexts. Thus, concepts such as “superiority,” “correctness,” and “properness” can all be seen as relative to the appropriate context.

Taken together, myths about the absolute superiority, correctness, or properness of one language variety over another illustrate the perniciousness of certain language myths. Bauer and Trudgill mince no words in capturing the gravity of the problem of such language myths by asserting that “prejudices based on the way other people speak are akin to racism and sexism” (1998, p. xvii).

Continuing in descending order of rejection, three statements were judged to be myths by more than 80 percent of students. One, a popular notion in the *Nihonjinron* literature, “Language equals ethnicity; i.e., Japanese is spoken by Japanese people”(言語＝民族性。つまり、日本語は日本人によって話される), was rejected by 87 percent of the students. In other words, the vast majority of these

students recognized that first-language acquisition has nothing to do with one's ethnic background or genetic heritage. In fact, Maher (1996) has called the linkage of nationality and language “frankly racist.” As Fromkin, Rodman, and Hyams put it, “Any normal child, born anywhere in the world, of any racial, geographical, social, or economic heritage, is capable of learning any language to which he or she is exposed” (p. 29).

Additionally, 84 percent of students considered the statement “Japanese is more refined than many other languages” (日本語は他のほとんどの言語より優雅な言語である) to be false. Unfortunately, three fewer students (74 percent of the total) rejected a similar statement about a variety of the native language of most of the students: “Kyoto Japanese is the most refined kind of Japanese” (京都弁が一番優雅な日本語である). One of the main problems with these kinds of statements is that they are purely subjective and impossible to verify. Likewise, the definition of a quality such as “refined” is variable and may be culturally relative.

A related statement about languages in general—“Some languages are better than others” (ある言語は他の言語より優れている)—was also rejected by 74 percent of students. However, it is troubling that eight students (26%) still accepted this notion. More than merely reflecting personal preferences, the myth that certain language varieties, whether independent languages or dialects and accents, are inferior, less refined, not as beautiful, primitive, backwards, incorrect, not proper, or any number of other negative attributes can lead to the kind of prejudices “based on the way other people speak” that Bauer and Trudgill compare to racism and sexism (1998, p. xvii).

One example of this is the case of minority children in schools where subtle racism and linguistic prejudice may go hand in hand to hold back academic progress. In a well-known case in the United States, the Oakland, California, school board decided in 1996 to recognize “Ebonics,” or African American Vernacular English, a variety of English spoken by many African Americans, as a language of instruction to help black children acquire fluency in standard American English as a means of positively impacting academic performance. Although the Linguistic Society of America unanimously supported the school board's decision at its annual meeting, calling it ‘linguistically and pedagogically sound’ (Wardhaugh, 2002, p. 346), politically powerful non-linguists loudly condemned the school board's decision. In the end, the Oakland School Board voted to drop the word “Ebonics” from its plan.

Linguists may think that we should be “teaching everyone to be tolerant and accepting of other varieties,” but this is “a perhaps hopelessly utopian view,” according to the linguist Ronald Wardhaugh (2002, p. 346). In addition, Milroy and Milroy (as cited in Wardhaugh, 2002, p. 346) have noted the irony that discrimination based on race, religion, and social class is now considered unacceptable, yet

“discrimination on linguistic grounds is publicly acceptable, even though linguistic differences may themselves be associated with ethnic, religious, and class differences.”

A third myth was rejected by more than 80 percent of students. Eighty-one percent rejected the myth that Japanese is the only language of Japan. Thus, the class time spent discussing the other languages of Japan seems to have been largely effective. As mentioned above, Japanese Sign Language (JSL, or *nihon shuwa*) and Ainu are unarguably independent languages. Estimates of the number of native signers of JSL range from 57, 000 (Ichida, 2001, p. 45) to between 317,000 and over 7.5 million (Gordon, 2005, para. 1). On the other hand, the number of native speakers of the Ainu language is practically nil because of the systematic decimation of the language resulting from the assimilation policies of successive Japanese governments since the Meiji Period. Ethnologue (“Ainu” para.) estimates the number at no more than 15 fluent speakers, and this estimate is twelve years old. Since the 1990s, efforts to revitalize the Ainu language have dramatically increased, and at present the number of second-language speakers is increasing.

Some linguists also consider Ryukyuan, the indigenous language of Okinawa Prefecture and the Amami islands of Kagoshima Prefecture, to be a separate language, although its independence from Japanese is argued. For example, Shibatani (1990, xiii) asserts, “The genetic relationship between Japanese and Ryukyuan has been proven and the transparency of the relationship is such that the latter is now considered as a dialect (group) of Japanese by most scholars.” However, another view holds that Japanese and Ryukyuan are both descended from a common ancestor known as Proto-Japonic or Proto-Japanese-Ryukyuan. According to this view, Japanese and Ryukyuan are considered to be a language family called the Japonic languages or Japanese-Ryukyuan languages that split into the dialects of Japanese and of Ryukyuan sometime during the Yamato period (“Japonic Languages,” para. 1). One problem in resolving this issue is the difficulty of clearly defining “language” and of distinguishing “dialects” and “languages” (see Wardhaugh, 2002, pp.27-46). For instance, despite Shibatani’s assertion that most scholars consider Ryukyuan to be a dialect of Japanese, Ethnologue counts 11 varieties of Ryukyuan as “languages” rather than as dialects to arrive at the figure of 15 languages in Japan (the others not so far mentioned are Korean and Japanese itself).

Statements that were judged to be myths by more than 70 percent of the students included the 77 percent who rejected the notion that children who have lived overseas for several years, so-called *kikokusei* or *kikoku shijo*, cannot speak Japanese well. (帰国生は日本語があまり上手く話せない). However, nearly half of the students (48%) accepted the enduring myth that Japanese is harder than other languages (日本語は他の言語より難しい). Native speakers of Japanese often think their language is difficult because of the elaborate system of honorific language or because of the

complicated writing system, both of which can be difficult even for native speakers to master. Shibatani points out (1990, p. 391) that this perception may also owe something to the fact that few Westerners have mastered the language, which he attributes not only to linguistic factors but also to the myth that Japanese is a difficult language. Shibatani further asserts that this myth has made many Westerners feel that they were not expected to speak Japanese because of its supposed difficulty for non-Japanese. However, the fact that, as we saw earlier, 87 percent of the students in this survey rejected the linkage of ethnicity and ability to speak Japanese leads to the conclusion that the 48 percent who still believed that Japanese is harder than other languages may have others reasons for accepting this myth. In fact, 71 percent also rejected the myth that foreigners cannot speak Japanese well (外国人は日本語があまり上手に話せない).

The trouble with the statement that Japanese is harder than other languages is the phrase “other languages.” Andersson (1998, pp. 56-57) concedes that “some languages appear to be harder than others, but it is hard to explain exactly how and to what extent.” First of all, it is easier to learn languages that are more closely related to your first language. German is probably easier to learn for English native speakers because both are Germanic languages that share many grammatical and lexical similarities, while English and Japanese are structurally quite dissimilar. The Japanese language is usually classed with Altaic languages such as Turkish, Mongolian, and Korean, although its genetic links to these languages are not as clear as those of English are to other Indo-European languages. This relative linguistic isolation may also help bolster the myth that Japanese is harder than other languages. Of course, considering the negative language-learning experiences so many Japanese school children have with English, it is surprising that more do not think English is the hardest language in the world to learn.

A key point is that languages are “not uniformly simple or difficult” and that “simplicity in one part of the language may be balanced by complexity in another part” (Andersson, 1998, p. 56). Japanese honorific language has both a grammatical and a pragmatic dimension, and few would deny that it is very difficult to master. Yet, politeness in English, especially at the pragmatic level, is not necessarily easy for Japanese and other learners to master either. Although English does not signal social distance in quite the same elaborate way that Japanese does with honorifics, “there might be other ways to signal social distance which are more subtle and, therefore, just as hard to learn, for example, choosing between *Johnnie*, *John*, *Smith*, *Mr. Smith* and so on,” as Andersson (p. 52) points out.

If Japanese honorifics are hard to master, most native English speakers, at least, find the Japanese sound system relatively easy to learn, if not to completely master. This contrasts with the myriad difficulties Japanese and other learners have with the numerous English vowel sounds and with

certain consonant sounds such as the distinction between /l/ and /r/, /b/ and /v/, or the *th*- sounds, for example.

A good deal of class time was also spent clarifying the concept of politeness in general as well as challenging the notion that languages with elaborate systems of honorifics are inherently “more polite” than languages with less elaborated honorific systems. In spite of this, only 68 percent of students rejected the notion that Japanese is more polite than English (日本語は英語より礼儀正しい言語である). As Maher (1996) puts it, this statement “is neither right nor wrong. The claim is just conceptually impossible.” Nevertheless, 10 students (32%) apparently did not catch the conceptual impossibility of the statement and perhaps also did not sufficiently understand the subtlety of English politeness and continued to hold on to this stubborn myth.

Five statements continued to be accepted by the majority of students at the end of the course. For example, 52 percent continued to believe that the written language is more basic than the spoken language (書き言葉(文字)は話し言葉より言語の基本である). Among other reasons, the difficulty of the Japanese writing system and the emphasis on the learning of Kanji characters in school often make it appear at least that there is a greater emphasis on the written language than on the spoken language among Japanese. Of course, in purely linguistic terms, the spoken language is primary. This point was not extensively discussed in class, and probably as a result, a slight majority of students still accepted the idea.

Four statements had to do with language and gender. One statement that concerns a fundamental understanding of how women and men use language showed that the vast majority of these students (71%) still accepted the myth that women talk more than men (女性は男性よりよく話す). Respondents did not indicate their gender, but the majority of the students (18, or 58%) were female. Only nine students rejected this myth, which means that even if all nine were female, at least half of all the females in the class accepted the myth.

Holmes (1998, p. 42) gives the lie to this myth: “Despite the widespread belief that women talk more than men, most of the available evidence suggests just the opposite.” She cites a review of 63 studies of the amount of talk by American men and women in different contexts that showed that women talked more than men in only two studies. Holmes suggests that on the basis of this and other evidence “we must conclude that the stereotype of the garrulous woman reflects sexist prejudice rather than objective reality” (p. 43). The fact that so many young women in this class do not seem to challenge this “sexist prejudice” is disturbing and calls attention to the potentially deleterious consequences of commonly-held misconceptions about language. For example, the stereotype that women talk more than men has been used to denigrate women as less serious, less intellectually

competent, and by extension less capable than men, and if a majority of the young women in this class fail to question this stereotype, and if they are at all representative of young women in Japanese society today, then the continuing improvement in the status of women in society may be in trouble.

Language use is simply too varied, as well as variable, to be reduced to the kinds of simplistic either/or types of statements on the list in this study. Accordingly, there are several variables that affect the amount of talk. There is evidence, for instance, that whether women or men talk more may depend on the context; namely, on the participants in the conversation and the setting. For example, American, British, and New Zealand researchers have found that “men dominate the talking time in committee meetings, staff meetings, seminars and task-oriented decision-making groups” (Holmes, p. 45). This suggests that “men talk more than women in public, formal contexts because they perceive participating and verbally contributing in such contexts as an activity which enhances their status, and men seem to be more concerned with asserting status and power than women are” (p. 45). On the other hand, “women tend to talk more with close friends and family, when women are in the majority, and also when they are explicitly invited to talk (in an interview, for example)” (p. 47).

In mixed-gender settings, studies show that the kind of talk that women and men contribute may also differ. For example, women’s talk tends to be more supportive and facilitative, while men’s talk is more referential or informative (Holmes, p. 45). The research reported by Holmes is from English speakers, and although cultural differences cannot be ruled out, there is no reason to believe that Japanese speakers are substantively different. In the end, human behavior is far too complex to be reduced to simple generalizations; not all women or men conform to these patterns in all circumstances. If it seems that women talk a lot with other women, it does not follow that men never talk a lot with other men.

A second myth relating to gender was that men’s and women’s language are completely different (女言葉と男言葉は全く違う). In contrast to English, Japanese has special terms—*onna kotoba* and *otoko kotoba*—to describe women’s speech and men’s speech respectively, and these terms are widely known and used. From a Whorfian perspective, this fact could lead Japanese speakers to agree with the statement that men’s and women’s language are completely different. However, among the students in this study, more than twice as many acknowledged its falsity (21) as considered it true (10). Nevertheless, the 10 students who accepted this myth represent nearly one-third (32%) of the total. While it is true that Japanese women’s and men’s language do tend to have certain distinctive differences, such as different sentence-final particles (male *yo* versus female *wa*, for instance), this is far from universal, and each gender’s language is self-evidently not “completely” different from the other’s. Like the statement about one language being more polite than another, this claim is also

conceptually impossible.

There is, as well, abundant anecdotal evidence that the two varieties of Japanese are converging. As is typical in such cases, the direction of convergence is toward the variety with higher prestige, or, in this case, toward male usage. Yamauchi (2008), for instance, points out that more and more young women “tend to intentionally use traditionally male styles of speech,” including less of the sentence-final particle *wa*.

How does a tendency for young women to adopt male speech styles affect the perception of the language of young women and young people in general? Apparently, it is evaluated quite negatively, even among young people themselves. In this class, a significant 77 percent of the students agreed that young women speak rougher now than they used to (今日の若い女性達の話し方は以前の若い女性達の話し方より乱暴である). Similarly, 71 percent agreed that young people nowadays cannot use honorific language correctly (今の若い人達は敬語が正しく使えない). The supposed linguistic shortcomings and abuses of young people are often lamented by older generations, and the charge that young people are ruining the language is nothing new. Again, this is a matter of opinion and of personal preference, but these survey results indicate that young people themselves have largely absorbed these criticisms from adults and, at least publicly, agree with them.

All of this relates to a universal and a constant of language; namely, that “all languages change all the time,” as Trudgill puts it (p. 1). One type of language change, non-sexist language reform, was one of the focuses in this course, but in Japanese this type of engineered language change is still somewhat novel, and this may have been reflected in the fact that only 58 percent of the students rejected the statement “So-called generic words such as *kyodai* (brothers and sisters), *itoko* (cousin), and *karera* (they/them) include women, so they are not sexist” (「兄弟」, 「従兄弟」, 「彼ら」のようないわゆる総称的な言葉は女性も含めているから性差別語ではない).

There is some evidence for English that so-called generic nouns and pronouns may not always be perceived as referring to women as well as to men. For example, studies of publications in the United States, Canada, and Australia have shown that when the so-called generic *-man* suffix is replaced with the supposedly gender-neutral *-person* suffix in words like *chairperson* and *spokesperson*, the latter supposedly gender-neutral terms are used primarily to refer to women rather than to men (Pauwels, 1998, p. 219). For example, men remain “chairmen,” while women are now often referred to as “chairpersons,” indicating a tendency to see the *-man* suffix as referring to males only. In Japanese, arguably more than in English, there exists a more one-sided gender specification, whereby traditionally female occupational and status titles, for example, tend to be marked overtly as female by having the character meaning female (女) in the word, whereas traditionally male occupational

and status titles are not marked for gender by the character designating a male. The words in the survey statement do not contain the character for male (男), but all three do contain characters that refer to males: “兄弟” (*kyoudai*) is composed of the characters for “older brother” and “younger brother,” while “従兄弟” (*itoko*) contains the same two characters, and the first character in “彼ら” (*karera*) means “he/him.” In spite of this visible male reference, 42 percent of these students continued to accept these traditional terms as referring generically to both males and females and, thus, as not being sexist.

## Conclusion

Myths and misconceptions about language and how it works abound. The results of this survey warn that certain myths and misconceptions are so enduring that they may persist despite efforts by linguists to better inform the public about how language works; in this case, my efforts to inform my students in the class *Gengo to Shakai* [Language and Society].

The perception that language change is generally not a good thing is one of the most widely-held beliefs about language. This was reflected in the fact that a majority of the students supported three of the four statements in this survey that dealt directly with language change as a negative phenomenon: 77 percent agreeing that young women speak rougher now than they used to, 71 percent supporting the idea that young people nowadays cannot use honorific language correctly, and 58 percent concurring that recent language changes, such as *-reru* for *-rareru*, are not good. A fourth statement claiming that so-called generic Japanese terms written in characters representing males were not sexist was rejected by only 58 percent of the students.

Whether these and other language changes are good or bad—whether they are myths or misconceptions—is, of course, a matter of opinion. Perhaps only if change led directly to the demise of a language, as in the case of speakers shifting from their native language to a more prestigious language, could one say with certainty that change was bad. However, even in that case there might be a difference of opinion as to whether the lost language was truly deserving of rescue.

Issues that come down to a matter of opinion or of personal preference are not easily resolved. However, the negative consequences of these kinds of matters of opinion or preference about language, such as the insidious myth that one language variety is “better,” “more beautiful,” “more correct,” “more proper,” etc. than another, can potentially be ameliorated through linguistic explanation. Thus, one of the jobs of the linguist is to counter the sometimes elitist pronouncements of prescriptivists who would draw a narrow circle around the language variety they prefer and exclude

others.

As we have seen, all language varieties are “complex and structured means of expression and perception” (Bauer & Trudgill, 1998, p. xvii), and in purely linguistic terms no one variety is inherently better, or more “correct,” than any other. “Superiority,” “correctness,” etc. are contextual concepts. That is, in formal reports, in school papers, in business correspondence or when going for a job interview, etc. the standard variety of a language is usually more correct and, thus, more suitable than the local variety. Yet, the local variety may be “more correct” and more suitable, for instance, when speaking—or text messaging—to your friends who share the same variety. In either case, it becomes a matter of solidarity, as well as of acceptance.

What is unfortunate is when in school, for example, children are not taught this but rather only that the standard variety is “correct” and acceptable. Not only may they not be taught to become “bilingual”—able to codeswitch appropriately between the standard and their native variety—but they may actually be taught to think that their natural way of speaking is inferior. Objectively speaking, what point does such a message serve? Bauer and Trudgill do not exaggerate when they equate such prejudices with racism and sexism (1998, p. xvii). As with the Ebonics controversy in Oakland, California, the fact is that the message minorities and women often receive is that their language variety is not as good or is more frivolous, etc., and they tend to believe it, as we saw with the majority of females in this class agreeing that women talk more and that young women’s speech is rough. As Holmes (1998, p. 43) has pointed out, such myths may be more a reflection of sexism than of “objective reality.” Likewise, myths about the inferiority of certain language varieties generally reflect prejudice more than any “objective reality.”

These myths about language, and others as well, often contain an element of fear: fear that young people will not become “bilingual” and able to use the standard variety; fear that the language variety of the minority will prevail and overwhelm the standard variety; fear that “the language,” that is, the standard variety of the language, is being corrupted. Whether a particular language variety, usually the standard variety, is actually being corrupted or not is also largely a matter of opinion. However, in order to maintain standards of any kind, language or otherwise, the standards must be understood correctly. This is where the job of the linguist is crucial.

Bauer and Trudgill’s (1998, pp. xvii–xviii) view is that

languages and dialects are unique and miraculous products of the human brain and human society. They should be discussed respectfully and knowledgeably and, for all that we may marvel at them as objects of enormous complexity and as vehicles, sometimes, of sublime expression, they should also be discussed dispassionately and objectively if we are to achieve a

better understanding of this uniquely human characteristic.

However, Wardhaugh (2002, p. 346) warns that this is perhaps “a hopelessly utopian view”:

The inescapable reality is that people do use language as a discriminator in just about every sense of that word. . . . Varieties of a language do exist, and people do use these varieties for their own purposes, not all of them to be applauded. As linguists we may deplore this fact, but we would be naive to ignore it. It may not be something we can do anything about, for it may well be the case that this is an inevitable use people make of language, and in that sense some kind of linguistic (or social) universal.

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## Appendix

### 言語に関する作り話か、事実か

#### Language Myth or Language Fact?

次の文をどう思いますか。その通りだと思う場合は「T」を、違うと思う場合は「F」に○をしてください。What do you think of the following statements? Circle “T” if you think the statement is true, and circle “F” if you think the statement is false.

- T F 1. 日本語は日本の唯一の言語である。Japanese is the only language of Japan.
- T F 2. 日本語は他のほとんどの言語より優雅な言語である。Japanese is more refined than many other languages.
- T F 3. 京都弁は一番優雅な日本語である。Kyoto Japanese is the most refined kind of Japanese.
- T F 4. アイヌ語や他の先住民の言語は日本語、英語等より単純な言語で現代の世界を表すために不十分な言語である。Aboriginal languages like Ainu are more primitive than Japanese and English and are inadequate for expressing concepts in the contemporary world.
- T F 5. ある言語は他の言語より優れている。Some languages are better than others.
- T F 6. 日本語は他の言語より難しい。Japanese is harder than other languages.
- T F 7. 日本語は英語より礼儀正しい言語である。Japanese is more polite than English.
- T F 8. 日本語の標準語は方言より正しい日本語である。Standard Japanese is more correct Japanese than regional dialects.
- T F 9. 標準語を話す人はなまりがない。Standard language speakers don't have an accent.
- T F 10. 書き言葉(文字)は話し言葉より言語の基本である。The written language is more basic than the spoken language.
- T F 11. 帰国生は日本語があまり上手く話せない。Children who have lived overseas for several years cannot speak Japanese well.
- T F 12. 言語=民族性。つまり、日本語は日本人によって話される。Language equals ethnicity; i.e., Japanese is spoken by Japanese people.
- T F 13. 外国人は日本語があまり上手に話せない。Foreigners can't speak Japanese well.
- T F 14. 今の若い人達は敬語が正しく使えない。Young people nowadays can't use honorific language correctly.
- T F 15. 今日の若い女性達の話し方は以前の若い女性達の話し方より乱暴である。Young women speak rougher now than they used to.
- T F 16. 女性は男性よりよく話す。Women talk more than men.
- T F 17. 女言葉と男言葉は全く違う。Women's and men's language are completely different.
- T F 18. 「兄弟」, 「従兄弟」, 「彼ら」のようないわゆる総称的な言葉は女性も含めているから性差別語ではない。So-called generic words such as “kyodai” (brothers and sisters), “itoko” (cousin), and “karera” (they/them) include women, so they are not sexist.
- T F 19. 「～られる」から「～れる」のような最近の言語変更はよくない。Recent language changes, such as “reru” for “rareru,” are not good.