Comment:
Towards a Portrait of Multilingualism of Tokyo

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I believe that we live in a world of post-modernity, and that this world is governed by two opposing principles. One of them, which revealed itself early, is humanism. The other is rationalism (Neustupný 2000). Humanism has given us the ideology of multilingualism and multiculturalism, while rationalism has contributed skepticism about the multicultural perspective. This world of post-modernity provides the background for discourse about multilingualism in the Tokyo area and its dynamism. It will not last forever, but it will be our world for at least a decade to come.

The project proposed by Coulmas and his team is of considerable interest. I commend the idea of concentrating on Tokyo. Debunking the myth of Japan's monoculturalism has entered its third decade and the stories of the Ainu, Ryukyuans, and the Koreans, although undoubtedly vastly important, have lost their novelty. The absence of these stories in the introduction to Coulmas' statement is refreshing. It is the postmodern type of multilingualism that attracts attention today. In the Australian context, already many years ago (Neustupný 1985), I called the issue "immigrants versus sojourners". In the Japanese context it is important that sojourners include not only expatriate executives, foreign students, teachers or entertainers, but also foreign workers, of whom presumably only a minority intend to stay. To examine this variety is, I understand, the intention of Coulmas' project and to draw a detailed map will be a meritorious achievement.

Tokyo represents a huge accumulation of communities; the project will surely make this clear whether it concentrates on the administratively delimited Tokyo alone or includes the environs, which in fact form a continuous settlement. There is a considerable geographical variation of the "foreigner problem" within the wider area. The time axis is also of importance in this connection. The concentration of foreigners in the area of the city of Yamato (Kanagawa Prefecture) lasted for about a decade, before the foreign population passed over to other localities. Fluidity is not an extra. It is one of the most important core components of the problem. It affects not only the geographical distribution of multilingualism but the socioeconomic situation, as well as the attitudes.

The socioeconomic distribution of multilingualism in Japan, as it appears in section 4.1 of the proposal, will be an important contribution to the sociolinguistics of Japan. I believe that the extensive communities of "Japanese language volunteers" and Japanese language teachers, which display the most advanced attitudes to multiculturalism, will become one of the focuses of the study. I also believe that the project

will naturally develop into a series of microlevel studies that examine the situation in individual companies, social organizations, and schools.

It will be of interest to see what attitudes to multilingualism are reported by the Japanese community. I assume that while analyzing the questionnaires and results of interviews, the difference between what people say (idiom) and what they think (attitudes) will receive more attention than in the standard questionnaire studies. Experience of a similar study undertaken in the early 1990s showed that already at that time it was close to impossible to make in Japan a public statement opposing multiculturalism; however, in many cases there were doubts that the positive statements were sincere. Yet, the difference between idiom and attitudes is not limited to cases of insincerity. Anti-variation or pro-variation discourse is strongly established as a discourse pattern and to unearth the attitudes behind it is not an easy task.

The question of assimilation, both at the level of interaction and attitudes, is important. The ideologies of humanism within the sphere of multiculturalism are strongly against it. On the other hand, rationalistic ideology looks at assimilation as an inevitable accompaniment of internationalization or globalization. Without taking sides, it is possible to deal with this question in a comprehensive way. And the question holds special importance for the understanding of multilingualism within its historical matrix.

References

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