Teaching "the Devil's Own Tongue": The Challenges of Offering Japanese in a College Environment

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LEGEND has it that Saint Francis Xavier, who arrived in Japan in 1549 and immediately dubbed the Japanese “the finest people we have yet encountered” (Boxer 37), left several years later a frustrated and discouraged missionary and blamed his lack of proselytizing success in part on the Japanese language, which, the legend says, he reviled as “the devil’s own tongue.” Having started my study of Japanese during a two-year stint as a Mormon missionary in Japan, I can relate to Xavier’s purported fury, though I tend to blame more secular causes for the fact that, as a supposed teacher of Japanese, I alternate between feeling like a fraud and feeling like a masochist. If this level of discouragement can be readily confessed in such a forum as this, it is easy to imagine how dewy-eyed undergraduates feel after a few weeks, months, or years of struggle with the Japanese language. Even the less religiously inclined among them may resort to blaming Lucifer for their classroom woes.

In this paper I would like to attempt a brief overview of the numbers and kinds of students taking college-level Japanese courses today, these students’ motivations and challenges, and some of the ways in which Japanese is different from the more commonly taught languages. There are, in fact, so many ways in which Japanese is different from the more commonly taught languages that the National Foreign Language Center has chosen to christen it a “truly foreign language,” noting that “for the first time in U.S. history, the study of a noncognate language, one outside the Indo-European family . . . has been mainstreamed. That language is Japanese” (Jorden 1).

The MLA figures on enrollment fluctuations in university language programs are widely known (see appendix). Japanese language enrollments in the United States stood at a mere 1,746 in 1960; that number had increased nearly sevenfold by 1980 to 11,506. But even that leap in interest could not have prepared us for the growth that took place between 1986, when the number had already climbed to 23,454, and 1990, when it reached 45,717.

During this four-year period, enrollments in Japanese increased by almost ninety-five percent, compared with a thirty percent increase in Russian, a twenty-nine percent increase in Spanish, increases of around twenty percent in both Portuguese and Italian, a ten percent increase in German, and a slight decline in French (Brod; Brod and Huber). This unpredictable and essentially unmanageable surge corresponded, of course, to proclamations that Japan was “number one” and that the twenty-first century would be the “Asian century.”

My institution, Brigham Young University, is and always will be an anomaly in the study of language enrollments, because our programs are designed to respond to returned missionaries who enroll in intermediate-level courses after completing their service activities abroad. But in one way we do reflect what I believe to be the national trend in Japanese enrollments, so I would like briefly to examine our figures. Our data indicates a 148% increase in Japanese course enrollments between 1978 and 1991. But between 1991 and 1995, we had a twenty percent decrease. Even so, BYU continues to graduate more majors in Japanese than in any other language except Spanish.1 Examined in the light of American perceptions of Japan and its economy, these figures, in addition to describing the raw challenges we face as language teachers, also, I think, tell us something about who students of Japanese are and why they are studying Japanese.

On a simplistic level, a good portion of the rising student interest in Japanese can be traced to the successes of

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the Japanese economy in the late 1980s, to media-forged images of a declining America and a rising Japan, to the challenges inherent in breaking through Japanese trade barriers (Americans love a good fight), and to the promise of quick and large financial rewards for those who pursue business with Japan. Add to these factors the age-old interest in the “exotic” culture of Japan, toss in a pinch of orientalism, and you have a partial recipe for student interest. Last year at BYU, we had almost a thousand returned missionaries from Japan on campus. Forty-five percent had selected majors in business, economics, science, or engineering, presumably to complement the language skills they had developed abroad. Only ninety-six, or roughly ten percent, had selected a Japanese language major, and nearly a third of those students were a double major in business or science. Many of our students decide to take Japanese in the hope of becoming involved in international business, technology exchange, and other practical pursuits in which a knowledge of the language will work to their benefit. Combined with a sense that Japan is assuming leadership in many business and technology fields, the desire to be part of that cutting-edge ca-

tern or regional phenomenon is a strong motivating force. A good deal of the twenty percent decline in enrollments over the last four years can, however, be traced to what the Japanese themselves call the bursting of their economic bubble and to an overall souring of the impression that the Japanese economy in the late 1980s, to media-forged images of a declining America and a rising Japan, to the challenges inherent in breaking through Japanese trade barriers (Americans love a good fight), and to the promise of quick and large financial rewards for those who pursue business with Japan. Add to these factors the age-old interest in the “exotic” culture of Japan, toss in a pinch of orientalism, and you have a partial recipe for student interest. Last year at BYU, we had almost a thousand returned missionaries from Japan on campus. Forty-five percent had selected majors in business, economics, science, or engineering, presumably to complement the language skills they had developed abroad. Only ninety-six, or roughly ten percent, had selected a Japanese language major, and nearly a third of those students were a double major in business or science. Many of our students decide to take Japanese in the hope of becoming involved in international business, technology exchange, and other practical pursuits in which a knowledge of the language will work to their benefit. Combined with a sense that Japan is assuming leadership in many business and technology fields, the desire to be part of that cutting-edge career phenomenon is a strong motivating force. A good deal of the twenty percent decline in enrollments over the last four years can, however, be traced to what the Japanese themselves call the bursting of their economic bubble and to an overall souring of the impression that Japan will retain its leadership in many technology fields. Further insight is provided by the survey results in Eleanor Jorden’s book Japanese Language Instruction in the United States: when asked what field they planned to enter after completing their study of Japanese, forty-nine percent of student respondents indicated business, eighteen percent government work, seventeen percent science and technology, fifteen percent college teaching, and eleven percent law. However, when asked their most important focus of interest in Japan, thirty-three percent of students said business, twenty-three percent said culture, and twenty-one percent reported a general interest (Jorden 123).

But what of the language itself and its role in the college foreign language curriculum? Is Japanese really as difficult a language as some people claim, or are students taking the language just chronic whiners? My own experience of studying the language, combined with a seventeen-year career spent trying to teach it in the classroom, leaves me persuaded that Japanese has earned its reputation for difficulty. All the languages we teach in the department of Asian and Near Eastern Languages at BYU are ranked by the Foreign Service Institute (FSI) as among the most challenging for native speakers of English to learn. (In fact, we have considered renaming ourselves either The Department of Category 4 Languages or The Department of Languages with Weird Scripts.) The FSI estimates that 1,320 hours of instruction in an intensive program in a Category 4 language are required to bring students to the same level of proficiency reached after only 480 hours of instruction in a language in Category 1 (which includes French and Spanish). In addition to Japanese, Category 4 includes only Arabic, Chinese, and Korean, but if both the spoken and written languages are included in this comparison, Japanese emerges as probably the most difficult, even among the Category 4 languages. (Jorden 3)

Here are just a handful of reasons why this might be true. Japanese is a subject-object-verb language, with highly inflected verbs and adjectives. One linguist has maintained that ninety percent of the activity in a Japanese sentence takes place at the end of the verb. The Japanese themselves are proud that they can begin a declarative sentence intending to state a certain opinion and then toward the end of the sentence, having detected disagreement or disharmony in the body language of the listener, change the ending of the verb to state precisely the opposite of what they started out to say. This reversal is rather like the colloquial phrasing that allows us to say, “I think our criminal justice system still works—not!”

The Japanese phonological system, with its five pure vowels and limited range of consonants, is very simple compared with that of many European languages, but precision and purity in pronunciation are essential and trip up many lazy learners, who also tend to gloss over essential differences between long and short vowels and single and doubled consonants. I once sat in a Tokyo McDonald’s and watched an American try for five minutes to order a Fanta Orange drink. “Fanta Orange! Fanta Orange!” he kept chanting, mantra-like. Four counter clerks were staring at his mouth, wondering what in the world he was saying. Finally he gestured vigorously toward the pop machine’s spigot, and one bright clerk turned, noticed the Fanta Orange logo, and said to his cohorts, “Aa, Fahntah!”

Now a few quick esoteric points. Many utterances in Japanese lack a subject. Critics of the culture might point to this lack as proof that the Japanese are experts at evading responsibility for their actions. But centuries of isolation and insulation have given the people of Japan a host of assumptions about human interaction and communication. And while I think that over the next few decades, as more and more Japanese interact with foreigners, the language will likely become more tangible referential and focalized, for now there is still a strong sense of communal individuality in a Japanese speech act. By omitting the subject, a speaker or writer can include the listener in a mutually satisfying, harmonious statement that relieves each of them of responsibility and preserves decorum. This point reminds me of a marvelous quip I recently heard: “What did the Zen monk say to the New York hot dog vendor? Make me one with everything.” Native speakers of Western languages, who are used to knowing
who is saying what about what or whom, struggle intensely with this notion of blurred individuality in speech acts. This is only one small but significant example of the ways in which the unique features of Japanese culture affect our understanding of the language and how it is used. And it is something that is very difficult to teach in the classroom. Abstractness, unspoken assumptions, the lack of distinctions between singular and plural, an enormously important system of honorifics that demands knowledge of the listener's social status, body language unlike our own, and many other culturally charged features of communication in the Japanese language run contrary to a student's range of familiar experience. Add to this the lack of a solid sense of verb tense—allowing speakers to reproduce past experience in the present tense, a kind of "you are there" perspective that also enables the listener to become part of the speaker's personal experience—and you have some thorny paths for classroom learners to tread. To quote Jorden once again, "Japanese is spoken within a society whose rules of social conduct are very different from those in the West... The student of Japanese must be concerned with language in culture—the Japanese language as it is used within Japanese society, following the patterns of Japanese behavior" (4). The implications of teaching the cultural framework of the language are enormous for us at American universities. Can any of us in good conscience teach our female students that they will need to act subservient and obsequious so that their language usage will be judged appropriate in communication situations with Japanese men? And how do we break the egalitarian habits of our students and persuade them that they must be conscious and respectful of status differences when they get off the plane in Japan? Is it reasonable to expect American students in the late 1990s to speak humbly to professors, or even to TAs, just so they have practice in real-life situations? And yet I sometimes wish I could have half an hour with Mickey Kantor, the secretary of commerce, so that I could suggest to him that alternating among the "Howdy, pardner" approach and the sanctimonious comments ("undoubtedly the most complex in the world," "cumbersome," "preposterous," "outmoded," and "a barrier to international communication.") (And those are the polite comments.) A student must initially master two distinct phonetic alphabets and then move on to acquire three to four thousand Chinese characters—each of which the Japanese have diabolically provided with at least two readings, occasionally ten or more—to achieve an intermediate level of reading capability. This situation should suggest why students curse and struggle and why many drop Japanese courses after encountering the Chinese doodles.

The upshot of all this, and perhaps the most important reason for chairs of modern language departments to understand the special challenges presented by Japanese, is that there is no way in either God's or Lucifer's world that even the brightest of students can achieve the same level of proficiency in Japanese after four years of classroom study as a mediocre student can in a Western language after the same amount of chair time. This fact was made clear to me by a conversation I had with a good friend who teaches Spanish at BYU. He and I teach roughly the same course—fourth-year readings in modern literature, the last language course a major takes before graduating. I asked him how many short stories he could reasonably assign his students. His answer seemed perfectly appropriate to me: "Six or seven." But then he added, "A week." And then I knew we resided on different planets, because my students can get through six or seven short stories each semester, and that's with up to three or four hours of dictionary work for every hour in class. I don't think I need to explain the kind of frustration that builds up among both students and teachers of Japanese as we watch second-year students in French or Spanish toting around their collections of stories, their novels and philosophical essays, while we at the same level are trying to get through the Japanese equivalent of Dick and Jane.

First, then, I make a plea to chairs and directors of programs who are in the process of trying to bring together Western languages with Japanese. Please understand the agonizing patience required of those trying to acquire some proficiency in Japanese. Know that most teachers in the country are doing a good job, even if students or their parents complain that after three years students still can't read the package directions for making instant ramen. And realize that students will inevitably compare themselves with their friends who are studying European languages and wonder what is wrong with their professors, what is wrong with themselves and their textbooks, and finally decide that the big bucks calling to them from across the Pacific just aren't worth the struggle. In Jorden's survey, when college teachers were asked why students give up the study of Japanese, twenty-one percent blamed "the difficulty of the language in general," seven percent joined Xavier in cursing the "difficulty of the writing system," nineteen percent said it took "too much time to prepare for class," eleven percent said "too much time is required to teach useful proficiency," and twelve percent simply blamed "lack of time." These figures strongly suggest that, while there is certainly room to improve our pedagogy and our materials, there is little we can do for nearly seventy percent of those who abandon hope in their study of this "infernal" language.

The reality, then, is that we are most likely guilty of false advertising. When we title a course Advanced Japa-
nese, the word advanced does not carry the same meaning as it does in the course title Advanced German. Truth be told, we probably graduate the vast majority of our Japanese students with intermediate or intermediate-high proficiency in spoken Japanese and often with a significantly lower level of capability in reading and writing. I am not prepared to argue that we change our labeling to conform to reality. But I think we have a responsibility as administrators and teachers to make clear to students at the beginning of the learning process just how much they can reasonably expect to acquire during their college careers, and they need to be encouraged not to make comparisons with friends studying other languages.

The history of the teaching of Japanese in this country is comparatively brief, but we have managed to make as many mistakes in pedagogical approaches as teachers of other foreign languages have, though in a shorter amount of time. Although rudimentary programs started up at Harvard and Columbia in the 1920s and 1930s, it was not until after World War II—when a generation of new professors trained by the military began to set up programs at the leading universities—that the teaching of Japanese became at all regular or systematized. We began, naturally, with a reading-and-translation approach; flirted for a couple of decades with the audio-lingual approach; tried out the cognitive approach, centered at Cornell in the 1970s and 1980s under Eleanor Jorden; and have been attempting variations on the communicative approach since about 1980. (I might note, simply to incite discussion, that we have yet to determine whether proficiency-based teaching alone makes sense and is most effective with a noncognate language like Japanese.) Most members of the professoriat were trained in either language and literature or in language and linguistics, but a handful of graduate programs have shifted their focus to language pedagogy and acquisition, and we are just beginning to see the emergence of highly qualified linguist-pedagogues who will be able to rationalize our teaching approaches, create appropriate articulation between levels of instruction, and produce more effective teaching materials. The best thing we can do for our Japanese programs right now is to seek out, hire, and reward such specialists. ACTFL has developed guidelines for oral proficiency interviews in Japanese, though we desperately need more native-speaker interns who will be available to initiate college language programs in this country. And it is working closely with the Association of Teachers of Japanese to facilitate articulation from high school to college language classes and to create a national dialogue on rational pedagogical approaches to the teaching of Japanese. I encourage foreign language chairs to use the resources of the Japan Foundation Language Center. The National Foreign Language Center has also developed a booklet titled A Framework for Introductory Japanese Language Curricula in American High Schools and Colleges. This is a useful starting point for establishing or improving a Japanese language program.

It is vital that we work together to disabuse nonacademic administrators of the belief that any native speaker of Japanese is qualified to teach the language. The number of trained native speakers is growing rapidly, but at present few programs offer them degrees in language pedagogy more advanced than a master's degree. We therefore need to be creative and to insist that appropriate, long-term, even tenurable slots be made available for these highly capable instructors. Without native speakers, we cannot expect to develop lasting, high-quality programs.

Although I would encourage departments to gear up for the next invasion from Asia (I am persuaded that yet another Category 4 language, Korean, will be the next boom language among college students and will be followed swiftly by Chinese), I think—and hope—that Japanese is here to stay. The big push now, toward which I have mixed feelings, is for business Japanese, and a number of institutions are creating programs to respond to this large, insistent need. As a culture man myself, I can’t help feeling that we will produce yet another generation of clods who will go clumping around on Japanese straw mats in their cowboy boots, offending more people than they are befriending. I therefore urge departments to consider these courses carefully and to place them no earlier than the end of the third-year level of conventional language instruction so that students will have the chance to acquire appropriate knowledge of the language’s cultural context before they set off to satisfy their yen for the yen. And, finally, may I, as politely and humbly as my Japanese training has prepared me to do, encourage the creation of a climate within departments that will in every area, including the allocation of resources, promote the establishment of truly international departments of modern languages that simultaneously pay homage to the Western cultural tradition and to the largely unexplored and unappreciated cultures of the East, in this case, the language and culture of Japan. Learning to understand his language may be the only way we can beat the devil at his own game.
Notes

1 I am indebted for this information to colleagues at Brigham Young University, including Robert Russell, who delivered a helpful paper, "A Curricular Response to Changing Enrollments and Student Needs: Japanese for Special Purposes at BYU," and Masakazu Watabe, who provided and interpreted local enrollment statistics.

2 A notable scholar who has argued vociferously that Japanese is not a difficult language is Roy Andrew Miller (Japan's Modern Myth and Nihongo).

3 Hiroshi Miyaji, a professor of Japanese at Middlebury College and a past president of the Association of Teachers of Japanese, makes this point forcefully.

Works Cited


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