

## The Language Awareness and Communication Competencies of Young People in Modern Japan – The Results of a Questionnaire

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### ABSTRACT

According to the early work of Noam Chomsky *competence* is described as a speaker-hearer's knowledge of the language and an idealized capacity to acquire language which is superior to *performance* (language in actual use). In this paper, *competence* is differentiated from *awareness* and is regarded not as an idealized capacity, but as a set of skills and general theoretical knowledge which can be acquired gradually by learner through his/her education and experience. The results of the fieldwork conducted in 2013 in Kansai and Kanto regions entitled *Nihon no wakamono no gengo ishiki to komyunikēshon ni tai suru ishiki* (*Japanese Youth's Language Awareness and Awareness Toward Communication*) was supported by the analysis of Internet resources and analysis of online and paper dictionaries of *wakamono kotoba* ('youth language'), *kyampasu kotoba* ('campus language') and *gyarugo* ('gals words'). The survey was divided into two parts: *First Language Awareness* and *Second Language Awareness*.

**KEYWORDS:** communication, language awareness, linguistic competence, youth language, second language, ambiguity

Recently, easy access to Internet-based resources has enabled people interested and engaged in researching the Japanese language to discover a growing number of articles, forums and blogs dedicated to the language of modern youth (in contemporary Japan this is known as *wakamono kotoba*). Not only does it seem to be worth considering from a language development perspective, but also as crucial evidence of the creativity of youngsters and their need to modify language.

The main purpose of this paper is to briefly present the language and communication competencies of young Japanese people with reference to Internet-based resources as well as an analysis of a questionnaire conducted in 2013 in Japan. The respondents of the survey were asked to express their opinions on two issues – their knowledge and attitude to their mother tongue (Japanese) as well as to the second language learned at school (mainly English). Although, the choice of two seemingly unrelated topics may meet some negative reception, it corresponds to the aim of this

paper which is to sketch and briefly illustrate the state of language in contemporary Japan using the example of youth language and their communication skills in their first and second languages.

### **Language and Linguistic Awareness**

The first thing to mention is the distinction between two terms that might easily be mistaken. While the term *linguistic awareness* (Note that *linguistic awareness is not the subject of current research*) refers to the greater syntactical, morphological and phonological knowledge of language researchers and professional linguists which enable them to conduct advanced investigation on different layers of linguistics, *language awareness* should be regarded as the common ability of the average language user (Bugajski 2007: 47-48). Consequently, we assume that regardless of nationality, age or gender, each of us is language aware on a larger or smaller scale. The fact that people are not engaged in discussing linguistic matters in their every-day life does not mean that they are devoid of mental knowledge (*language awareness*) of their first language. Noticing and correcting people's language errors, slips of tongues or incorrect pronunciation as well as adjusting the level of difficulty of the dispatch to the level of fluency of a particular foreigner speaking in our first language, are undisputed forms of evidence of being language aware. The current research on language knowledge and competencies of young people, in which selected aspects are briefly discussed in subsequent paragraphs, will enable us to portray the extent of language consciousness in contemporary Japan.

### **Awareness and Competence**

Before describing the results of the survey, it is essential to mention the distinction between *awareness* and *competence* as these two terms comprise crucial components of the current reflection on young people's knowledge and attitude toward their first and second language.

According to the early work of Noam Chomsky, *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax*, *competence* is described as a speaker-hearer's knowledge of the language and an idealized capacity to acquire language which is superior to *performance* (language in actual use) since natural speech is mistake-prone and may be full of false starts (Chomsky 1965: 4). However, in this article we will regard *competence* not as an idealized capacity but as a set of skills and general theoretical knowledge which can be acquired gradually by the learner through his/her education and experience. In this sense, *competence* will be differentiated from *awareness* which is intended to be regarded as

the consciousness of language usability and an effective device to use language not only for communicative purposes, but also as a tool to intentionally encode a message.

### Survey Description

The field work conducted in 2013 in Japan (Kansai and Kantō regions<sup>1</sup>) comprises the predominant source of information for the current research, which was also supported by the huge number of Internet resources and analysis of online and paper dictionaries of *wakamono kotoba* ‘youth language’, *kyampasu kotoba* ‘campus language’<sup>2</sup> and *gyarugo* ‘gals words’<sup>3</sup>.

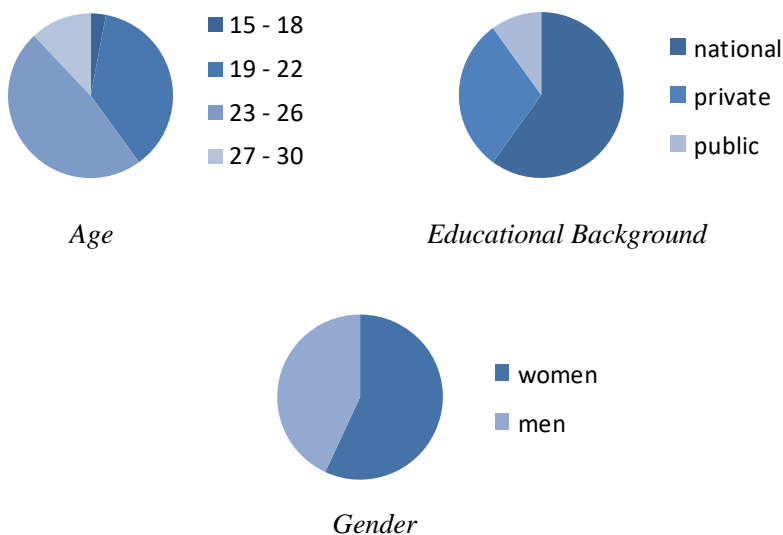


Figure 1. Age, Gender and Educational Background of Survey Respondents

<sup>1</sup> Although the research was intended to be conducted in the selected cities of Kantō and Kansai regions, a large number of respondents admitted to being citizens of other parts of Japan. Most of them were exchange students or travelers currently visiting the above-mentioned regions.

<sup>2</sup> *Kyampasu kotoba* ‘campus language’ – list of words and phrases used by students of a particular Japanese university. Some of them are available online.

<sup>3</sup> *Gyarugo* ‘gals words’ – vocabulary formed and used by Japanese gals (girls in their teens or early twenties that represent particular street fashion). *Gyarugo* is mostly based on neologism, abbreviations and loan words and is considered a part of net-slang as it is especially proclaimed by the users of social network services such as Twitter or Facebook.

One hundred and sixteen people aged between fifteen and thirty years old were asked to answer a short survey entitled *Nihon no wakamono no gengo ishiki to komyunikēshon ni tai suru ishiki* ('Japanese youth's language awareness and awareness toward communication').

According to their responses, more than 48 % were aged between twenty three and twenty six years old and about 37 % between nineteen and twenty two years old. More than 60 % of respondents declared themselves to be graduates from national schools (*kokuritsu*), 30 % of them had graduated from private schools (*shiritsu*) and only 10 % had graduated from public schools (*kōritsu*). Almost 57 % of the survey respondents were women (Figure 1).

The survey was divided into two significant parts (plus introductory section containing general questions referring to the place of origin, place of actual residence, age, gender and educational background). The first part was entitled *First Language Awareness* and the next part was dedicated to *Second Language Awareness*.

### **First Language Awareness**

Young Japanese people were asked for a self-evaluation of their first language competencies in the shape of a list of linguistic errors they happen to commit in every-day conversations. 70 % of survey respondents confessed to finding the use of honorific terms (*keigo*) the most problematic issue, especially when confronting elderly people. 62 % of them declared that they tend to commit morphological errors (e.g. the use of the incorrect adverbial form *mitaku* instead of the correct *mitai ni*) and 37 % admitted to having problems with spelling correctly. The wrong use of grammatical particles (22%) and the incorrect use of loan words (19%) turned out to be the least problematic linguistic issues.

Additionally, survey respondents kindly suggested other linguistic errors that are often committed by them or they peers. They indicated for instance, the wrong use of idioms and collocations; the incorrect spelling of loan words; the overuse of jargon and incorrect formation of potential forms (e.g. the incorrect use of *tabereru* in place of the correct *taberareru* 'be able to eat').

Young Japanese people were also asked to evaluate the frequency of the use of *wakamono kotoba* 'youth language' by suggesting adequate scores from 0 (not at all) to 5 (often used). The results are presented in Table 1.

<i>Wakamono kotoba</i>	<i>Score (0-5)</i>	<i>Frequency of Indicated Score<sup>4</sup></i>
Contracted forms (e.g. adj <i>muzui</i> ‘difficult’)	5	30 %
Words indicating a low degree of certainty or confidence (e.g. p <i>kamo</i> ‘perhaps’)	5	42 %
Ambiguous expressions (e.g. adj <i>yabai</i> ‘terrific’, quasi-adj <i>bimyō</i> ‘subtle’)	5	39 %
Loan words and <i>waseieigo</i> <sup>5</sup> (e.g. n <i>sutopā</i> ‘straight permanent wave’)	5	35 %
Hybrids (e.g. n <i>takopā</i> ‘party with takoyaki’)	3	29 %
<i>Gyarugo</i> ‘gals language’ (e.g. v <i>yaguru</i> ‘to have an affair’, <i>kopiru</i> ‘to copy’)	1	30 %
Adverbs of emphasis (e.g. adv <i>meccha</i> ‘very’, <i>chō</i> ‘very’)	5	29 %
	3	25 %
<i>Zenzen</i> ‘not at all’ as the adverb of emphasis	1	31 %
Honorific terms used at part-time jobs		
Other (e.g. morphological errors: <i>Kyō</i> , <i>jūgyō aruku nai?</i> <sup>6</sup> ‘No classes today?’)		

Table 1. The Frequency of Wakamono Kotoba Use

As suggested above, young people are linguistically creative and moreover, tend to use the language knowingly for particular purposes. Based on the initial results of this study, we can suggest four assumptions justifying the statement that Japanese youth appear to be, to some extent, language aware:

<sup>4</sup> The term *indicated score* refers to the score which has been most frequently selected by the respondents.

<sup>5</sup> *Waseieigo* ‘English words made in Japan’ – Japanese constructions formed from English words or morphemes which are generally not used in English-speaking countries (e.g. *sararī man* ‘salary man’).

<sup>6</sup> The negative short form *ku nai* is characteristic for *i*-adjectives (*takai* ‘high’ *takakunai* ‘not high’), not for verbs (*aru* ‘to have’ *nai* ‘not to have’). However, in this case the negative form was created as follows - in *i*-adjectives formation pattern and hence, the sentence above is morphologically incorrect.

1. Use of jargon (e.g. *gyarugo* ‘gals language’, *kyampasu kotoba* ‘campus words’) as a way to manifest ‘youthfulness’ and affiliation (belongingness) to a particular group
2. Use of *waseieigo*, neologisms and abbreviations [e.g. *kokuru* (contraction of *kokuhaku suru* ‘to confess’), *disuru* ‘to disrespect’, *NHK* (acronym for *nanka henna kanji* ‘it seems kind of strange’)] in order to consciously encode a message
3. Overuse of *aimaina kotoba* ‘ambiguous words’ (e.g. *yabai* ‘terrific’, *zenzen* ‘absolutely; at all’, *ichi ō* ‘in outline’, *bimyō* ‘delicate; doubtful’) and words indicating a low degree of certainty or confidence (e.g. *mitaina* ‘sort of’, *kamo* ‘perhaps’) in order to avoid direct confrontation or objection<sup>7</sup>
4. Tendency to adjust the level of difficulty of Japanese to the level of proficiency of the particular Japanese-speaking foreigner. 55 % of respondents stated that they use standard Japanese and prefer to choose *wago* (words of Japanese origin) and *gairaigo* (loan words) instead of *kango* (words of Chinese origin) while speaking with foreigners in Japanese. Vocabulary classified as *wago* or *gairaigo* is said to be easier to adopt and comprehend by foreigners learning Japanese and hence young people aware of the difficulty of the Japanese language are very understanding in this matter and attempt to simplify the language by avoiding *kango* which is regarded as more complex.

## Second Language Awareness

Foreign language education in Japanese primary schools originated in the early 1990s. Although the government has recently advocated progress in the effective learning of foreign languages and the language education system is supported by the assistance of a huge number of ALTs (*Assistant Language Teachers*)<sup>8</sup>, the communicative situation among young people in Japan is still regarded as poor and requires swift improvement.

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<sup>7</sup> According to the guests of the TV programme *Wakamono kotoba no shinsō*, ‘The Truth about Young People’s Jargon’, the language used by young people in contemporary Japan can be described by the juxtaposition *ōmori usuaji* ‘large serving mild tasting’. Their way of speaking is full of ambiguous expressions and hard to decode neologisms and abbreviations, which makes their statements obscure and chaotic (Youtube 2013). Moreover, although young Japanese people are said to be disposed to direct conversation, the contents of their conversations are thought to be less meaningful and valuable.

<sup>8</sup> ALT *Assistant Language Teacher* – native speaker of a particular foreign language who cooperates with teachers as an assistant in the Japanese classroom. There are currently over 6,100 participants in the JET Program (*The Japan Exchange and Teaching Programme*) and 90% of them work as ALTs.

On the basis of the response of young people interviewed on the main factors influencing problems with communication in foreign languages, the following causes may be listed:

1. The *Educational* aspect of problems with communication.
  - a. Lack of speaking and listening practice at school.
  - b. The language education system focused on learning and memorizing.
  - c. The decorative (not functional) purpose of using English.
  - d. The restricted efficiency of Grammar-Translation Method.
  - e. “Natives” teaching English who, in some cases, are not real native speakers (ALTs).
  - f. Lack of pronunciation practice.
2. The *Socio-psychological* aspect of problems with communication.
  - a. Lack of confidence and fear of committing mistakes.
  - b. Fear of incorrect pronunciation.
  - c. No conviction that language is a tool for communication (decorative purpose of English words).
  - d. No need to communicate in English after graduation.
  - e. No passion for Western culture.
  - f. Difficulty with dealing with notions that cannot be written with *kanji* signs.

The respondents of the above-mentioned survey were asked to evaluate the frequency of practicing the following methods of teaching foreign language proclaimed at their former or current schools and score it from 0 (not at all) to 5 (often practiced) (Table 2).

<i>Strategies</i>	<i>Score (0-5)</i>	<i>Frequency of Indicated Score</i>
Grammar-translation method	5	54 %
Grammar exercises	5	70 %
Listening exercises	3 and 4	24% and 32 %
Reading exercises	5	56 %
Writing exercises	3 and 4	30 % (both)
Conversation	2	40 %
Word games	2	43 %
Conversation with native speakers	2	41 %
Watching programmes, news, interviews during classes	1 and 2	30 % (both)
Other (e.g. vocabulary tests)	1	27 %

Table 2. The Frequency of Strategies of Teaching Foreign Languages at Schools

According to their responses, grammar exercises (70 % of respondents suggested 5 points), reading exercises (56 % – 5 points) and the grammar-translation method <sup>9</sup> (54 % – 5 points) are regarded as the most popularized strategies of teaching foreign languages at schools. On the other hand, conversation lessons (40 % – 2 points) or classes conducted by native speakers (41% – 2 points) were estimated as rarely or slightly practiced. Apparently, problems with communicating in a foreign language originates at schools and may result from the restricted development of communication competencies.

Although the lack of conversation-oriented practices limits the process of acquiring and improving communication competencies, young people in modern Japan tend to be more and more aware and eager to improve their communication skills.

The answers, when asked to evaluate the usefulness of following methods of extending foreign language skills and score them from 0 (not at all) to 5 (absolutely useful), were as in Table 3.

<i>Methods</i>	<i>Score (0-5)</i>	<i>Frequency of Indicated Score</i>
Direct communication with foreigners	5	64 %
Conversation through Facebook, Skype, etc.	5	38 %
Watching movies without subtitles	4	35 %
Listening to foreign music	3	28 %
Studying abroad	5	64 %
Going abroad for a trip	3	31 %
Hiring a home tutor	2	31 %
Going to <i>Eikaiwa</i> schools <sup>10</sup>	4	35 %

Table 3. The Usefulness of Methods Used to Improve Language Skills

Fukuda in her short paper entitled “Language Awareness in Language Education in Japan: Creating the Linguistic Competence Needed for Global Communication” claims:

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<sup>9</sup> Grammar-translation method – is a method of teaching foreign languages which is based on reading and translating sentences. Students are asked to learn grammar rules of the target language and then apply them by translating sentences between the first language and the target language. Although criticized, the grammar-translation method is still popular in many countries.

<sup>10</sup> *Eikaiwa* – private school of English conversation where classes are conducted mainly by native speakers.



“Today, Japanese people have more opportunity to interact with non-native speakers of Japanese. In an international society in which diverse values co-exist and the existence of common assumptions is doubtful, people need skills for verbal communication to form ideas or information using language.” (Fukuda 1996).

Widespread access to means of global communication as well as the opportunity to learn languages and participate in exchange programs have modified, in a certain sense, the attitude towards explicit communication and hence young people in contemporary Japan seem to be more receptive to open conversation.

According to the survey, young people tend to evince more interest in the development of their communication skills. Access to social network services such as Facebook, Skype or Twitter gives them the opportunity to associate with foreigners and communicate in English and other foreign languages (38 % – 5). Moreover, young Japanese people claim that going abroad to participate in student exchange programs (64 % – 5) to put their language competencies into practice is more useful and effective than for instance, hiring home tutors (31% – 2) or listening to foreign music (28% – 3).

Finally, young respondents of the survey on language awareness and communication competencies were asked to evaluate their own foreign language communication skills and to estimate the language fluency of their foreign language tutors. They were obliged to score the level of fluency from 0 (no skills) to 5 (fluent). The results for both cases were surprisingly similar. 31 % of young people admitted to finding themselves moderately fluent (3 points) and they similarly evaluated the language proficiency of their teachers (39 % – 3 points). However, only 3 % of the Japanese consider themselves to be fluent in a foreign language and admit that it may be motivated by the fact that they are studying abroad or tend to often encounter peers from foreign countries. Analogically, only 7 % of respondents find their current or former teachers as competent and fluent in the language they are lecturing. These numbers appear to be disappointing given that foreign languages have been taught in primary schools in Japan since the 1990s.

## **Conclusions**

To conclude, the results of the research presented in this paper indicate that there are few identifiable trends and patterns in the contemporary language

and communication situation in Japan. First of all, young Japanese people appear to consciously use their language (*wakamono kotoba*) as a tool for fulfilling their individual needs and obtaining their intended goals. They tend to be aware of how to modify the language (the formation of numerous neologisms, *waseieigo*, acronyms, etc.) and encode messages (ambiguous words, abbreviations, loan words, etc.) in order to manifest their affiliation to a particular group, youthfulness and independence (for instance, high school girls who are regarded as the most creative group in the matter of word-formation). Additionally, young Japanese people seem to be gradually more conscious of the significance of direct communication in a foreign language. Although the language education system in Japan is being modified and is becoming more conversation-oriented, young Japanese people are eager to develop their language competencies on their own by using social network services, studying abroad and making friends with foreigners.

The present paper constitutes an introduction to the subject of language awareness and communication competencies of young Japanese people and requires further research due to be conducted later.

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## **AUTHOR'S PROFILE**

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Patrycja Duc is a PhD candidate at the Faculty of Philology, Jagiellonian University who graduated from the Department of Japanese and Chinese Studies with master's degree in 2011. She also received a bachelor's degree in Russian Studies in 2009. Before graduation miss Duc completed the scholarship program entitled "The Japanese-Language Program for Specialists in Cultural and Academic Fields" conducted by the Japanese Language Institute in Kansai, Japan Foundation.

Currently she is a student of the fourth year of PhD course engaged in the sociolinguistic and ethnolinguistic research into the actual language situation in Japan and the role of context in Japanese language and culture. She is working as a teacher of Japanese language specializing in preparing students to JLPT exams.

In 2013 miss Duc received a grant which enabled her to conduct short fieldwork in Kanto and Kansai regions on the subject of language awareness and communication competences of Japanese youth. In the beginning of 2014 she conducted short research among students and teachers of private secondary school in Japan on the language and education issues in modern Japan.