"Heritage Japanese” in the era of “international Japanese” promotion

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This paper reports on a study of Japan’s policies on Japanese language teaching abroad, focusing on the conceptual conflict between “international Japanese” and “heritage Japanese”, based on policy document analyses and an ethnography at a training program for future Japanese language teachers.

This paper analyzes the status of the “heritage Japanese language” in the post-2000s Japanese language politics, which is marked by the Japan Foundation’s (JF) attempt to promote the “international Japanese”. JF, especially since its 2005 policy, has been promoting the “international Japanese”, which is conceptualized as an apolitical and utopian means of communication, associated with a space beyond the state territory, national boundary, and normativity of the “national” Japanese language. The speakers of the “international Japanese” are termed “Japanese language people”, as a group of cosmopolitan population beyond their nationality and the native/non-native dichotomy, who could function in Japanese to a certain extent.

In a surge of the “international Japanese” discussion in the 2000s, “heritage Japanese” is at its turning point. Historically, the “heritage Japanese” has been conceptualized as the Japanese language that was “brought” to the extraterritorial space by Japanese diaspora. The notion of “heritage Japanese” is accompanied by the stories of “maintenance”, which oftentimes connote “imperfection”, due to the normative and essentialized form of reproduction set as a desirable goal.

The “imperfection” of maintenance in the “heritage” context began to be reconceptualized as part of the “variety” of Japanese, by its encounter with the “international Japanese” discourse, which has a conceptual capacity to embrace “diversity” within the “Japanese” space constructed as stretching globally.

At the same time, the “heritage Japanese” speakers are still differentiated from the “international Japanese” speakers based on the history of “maintenance” desire and effort, which grant them certain “authenticity” and “ownership” of their Japanese, and keeps them as the heritage Japanese speakers.

Keywords: heritage language, Japanese language policy, linguistic cosmopolitanism.