Language in any society carries, and cannot be viewed in isolation from, a considerable freight of historical, political, cultural, and social significance. Language often plays an important role in historical and social change and is of course integral to ongoing social processes of all kinds. By its very nature, a language ideology, defined by Irvine as a “cultural (or subcultural) system of ideas about social and linguistic relationships, together with their loading of moral and political interests” (Irvine 1989: 255), permeates all facets of a society’s undertakings. This is certainly true of Japan, where a well-defined, well-documented, and very specific language ideology operates and is now under challenge from several quarters. In investigating language in Japan today, therefore, it is important to consider it in the context of major social developments.

Of the salient issues facing Japan in the early twenty-first century, those in which language is most clearly an important factor are the globalization-induced growth in immigration and the surge of technology in the form of new media, notably cell phones. Both of these have implications for literacy in differing ways, and through literacy are linked to national language ideology, as most clearly perceived in the current set of language policies, which inculcates expectations of script use through the education system. Then there is the government’s promotion of English, strengthened through the inauguration of the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Program in 1987 and ramped up dramatically since 2003 with the implementation of a five-year Action Plan to Cultivate Japanese with English Abilities. What do these developments mean for the way in which the nation imagines itself linguistically and otherwise? In this essay I will focus on these and other issues in which language plays an important part in today’s Japan.

We might profitably begin by considering the nature of language ideology in Japan and how it shapes social expectations of language use. Throughout Japan’s period of modern nation-building and later nation-protecting, the Japanese language – especially the written language and, within this, kanji (Chinese characters as used in Japan) rather than the two syllabaries (hiragana and katakana), in particular – has been viewed as a key marker of national identity. As such, language was occasionally used to mediate external relationships, as in Japan’s colonies of Korea (1910–45) and Taiwan (1895–1945), and always played a central role in shaping internal ideologies stemming from essentialist cultural theories. Japan is monolingual, ran one arm of the philosophy articulated in the influential discourses of Japanese uniqueness called Nihonjinron,
which flourished as a non-fiction publishing genre in the postwar period particularly in the 1980s and 1990s. The central government had historically taken good care to ensure that this – in theory, at least – should be so by prohibiting the use of Okinawan and Ainu languages under a policy of assimilation adopted during the consolidation of northern and southern national borders in the early modern period. Ethnic languages were suppressed within the areas susceptible to possible claims from other nations because if it could be demonstrated that the populace in these areas were Japanese citizens – that is, they spoke only Japanese – those areas could be rightfully claimed to belong to Japan. Ethnic languages were therefore suppressed in the name of nation-building, identified as inappropriate markers of Japanese citizenship.

As the twentieth century progressed, however, historical processes related in large part to Japanese colonialism meant that large communities of Korean and Chinese speakers settled in Japan, supplemented from the 1980s by communities of speakers of other languages (particularly Portuguese speakers from Brazil) who came to Japan seeking work. English and other languages, too, had long been spoken by expatriate communities of business people, students, and diplomats. It is clearly not the case that Japan is monolingual, nor has it ever been, and yet state discourses continue to ensure that the nation is presented in this light. In late 2005, for example, the then-Internal Affairs and Communications Minister Asō Taro, opening the Kyūshū National Museum, described Japan as the only country in the world having “one nation, one civilization, one language, one culture, and one race.” Not only was the importance of this one-nation-one-language nexus intimately connected to the construction of the modern Japanese state, it remains deeply embedded in the national psyche today. A 2001 survey of language attitudes by the Agency for Cultural Affairs (Bunkachō), for example, reported that the majority of respondents who indicated that they valued the Japanese language did so because they felt the language was what made them Japanese or because the language equated to the Japanese culture itself.

**Multilingualism**

In contemporary Japan, a significant and growing challenge to this assumption is the fact that the level of immigration to Japan – although only 1.63 percent of the total population at the end of 2006 and still small compared with other developed nations (Ministry of Justice 2007) – has risen sharply since the 1980s, bringing with it increased multilingualism. Top-level language policy has been slow to respond to this, but local governments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in areas where migrant communities live have not, instituting various practical solutions to language problems experienced by newcomers. In some cases local ethnic communities provide ethnic schools where children study academic subjects in their first language. Where this is not the case, or where parents have decided against an ethnic school, some migrant children go to Japanese schools, where their enrollment is permitted but not compulsory (meaning that some children do not attend school at all).

Most of the children who do attend government schools are clustered in schools in central Japan, where their parents work in factories, and for these students classes in Japanese as a second language (JSL), often run by volunteers, are provided on a currently somewhat ad hoc basis. Of the 5,281 schools where foreign students were enrolled in 2005, almost all in elementary and middle schools, just under half had only one person teaching JSL (Japan Times, April 27, 2006), despite the fact that in that same year the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) reported an increase of 5.2 percent over the previous year in the number of students deemed to need such classes. Only 85 percent of such students were actually receiving JSL instruction. A total of 54 first languages are spoken by these children, the most common
being Portuguese, Chinese, Spanish, Tagalog (Filipino), Korean, Vietnamese, and English, in that order.

In a 2007 report, MEXT provided for the first time the Ministry’s definition of students in need of JSL instruction: they are “those students who have insufficient Japanese for daily conversation, or who, even if they can converse in Japanese, lack the academic language appropriate to their grade level such that this is a barrier to their learning activities” (MEXT 2007). The number of such students increased by 8.3 percent over the 12 months preceding the report and by 12.5 percent between 2007 and 2008. In 2008, there were 6,212 schools where such students were enrolled, with just over half enrolled for less than two years. Of these schools, nearly 80 percent have fewer than five students in need of language instruction, and very few therefore employ full-time specialist JSL teachers.

Depending on the level of commitment to foreign resident communities at the local government level, some schools are proactively seeking to ease the difficulty of learning Japanese for immigrant children. For example, for Portuguese-speaking children in schools in Ōta City (Gunma Prefecture), where many Brazilian immigrants work in the automobile industry, the board of education has produced Portuguese-language readers to supplement the social studies texts used in grades three to six of elementary school. Local government and community organizations also offer language classes for adult immigrants. The economics of multilingualism is becoming an important topic in Japan today as immigrant numbers, and the consequent implications for the provision of services, including JSL classes, continue to increase.

Overall, multilingualism in Japan is experienced not as a naturally occurring permanent condition or as a national resource but rather as a practical management issue to be addressed by local councils, mainly by providing multilingual safety advice and residential information in hard copy and online formats. Of the 23 special wards of central Tokyo, for example, 20 offer web pages in English in addition to Japanese, 11 provide Chinese and Korean as well, and one adds French and German. The website of Sendai City, in northern Japan, home to thousands of international students, offers pages in Japanese, English, Chinese (both simplified and traditional characters to take account of usage in the People’s Republic of China and Taiwan), Korean, Italian, Spanish, German, and French. These pragmatic and useful initiatives are welcome, but acceptance of multilingualism in practice does not penetrate past this surface level. The multilingual skills of Japanese of Korean and Chinese backgrounds, for example, have until recently been viewed as a bar to higher education; it was not until 2004 that students graduating from the ethnic schools run by these two communities were permitted to take the entrance exams for national universities, although they had been able to apply to private and non-national universities before that time.

Changing concepts of literacy

Japan’s current script policies, instituted in the immediate postwar period and later refined slightly through official review, are predicated upon a static view of literacy in which everybody writes by hand. They were also devised in an era when the size of the character set determined what could realistically be expected in terms of learning to read and write, i.e. the issue of how many characters could be memorized. The major policies therefore specify the number of characters for general use to be taught in schools during the nine years of compulsory education (1,945 as set out in the List of Characters for General Use policy, 1981) and the kind of kana syllabary spelling to be used (Modern Kana Usage, 1946). To streamline the use of orthography, they further limit the readings to be assigned to characters depending on context (incorporated in the List of Characters for General Use policy), specify what proportion of a word is to be
written in kanji and what in hiragana, and designate simplified forms (compared to the more complex prewar versions) for certain characters.

Attitudes to kanji continue to form a deeply entrenched strand of language ideology. Despite the fact that characters were imported into Japan from China around the fifth century CE in the absence of any native writing system, kanji have long been regarded as icons of an almost mystical national cultural essence. This explains why it was so long into Japan’s modern period before the kind of script policies described above, which aimed to curb the unfettered use of characters and readings found in the prewar era, were established. Defeat in World War II and the overthrow of the right-wing ultranationalist philosophies that had underpinned the Japanese state, including its philosophies of language, were necessary before the idea that script could be susceptible to rationalization could gain traction in the public arena. Kanji today remain inseparable in the minds of most Japanese adults from the Japanese language itself, a view in which no distinction is made between the spoken and written language. The manner in which a person employs characters can be used to signal levels of education and culture (Brown 1990). In a 1998 survey by the Agency for Cultural Affairs, 73 percent of individuals queried about their attitudes toward kanji replied that they viewed kanji as indispensable for writing Japanese, while in a more recent survey 56 percent of those who expressed concern about low levels of kanji proficiency among elementary and middle school students gave as their reason that without kanji the national language culture could not be properly passed on (GOO Research 2007).

The rapid adoption of word-processing technology for Japanese language, first developed in 1978, has had important implications for the concepts of literacy enshrined in current script policies. Toshiba’s invention in that year of the first Japanese word processor was one of the most significant influences on the way Japanese is written since the beginning of the postwar period. Prior to the development of this technology, Japanese typewriters had been bulky, non-portable, and it required specialist training to use them because of the size of the character set. However, with the development of word-processing technology a user was able to surmount the seemingly intractable problem of printed text output. This technology led to Japanese-capable word-processing packages for PCs in the early 1990s. From there it was a short step to constructing a Japanese-language presence on the Internet, in particular following the advent of the World Wide Web, and, once initiated, that presence grew rapidly: in 2007, Japanese was the fourth most widely used language on the Internet, with an 83.3 percent growth in the use of the language on the Internet over the 2000–07 period (Internet World Stats 2007).

The phenomenon of cell phone Internet access, in which Japan leads the world, has propelled an explosion of mobile e-mail messaging among subscribers, most notably among young people. Cell phone usage is a striking feature of communications in Japan, where in 2005 there were 96.48 million cell phone subscribers (from a population of 128 million), 1.6 times the number of landline subscribers (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications 2006). Because cell phone e-mails are relatively inexpensive to send, and because the social prohibition on making voice calls in public places means that, in such situations, people send quiet e-mails from their cell phones instead (Okada 2005: 49), the primary usage of Japan’s cell phone Internet is for e-mail and not for talk (Matsuda 2005: 124). As a range of studies to date have shown, the kind of written language used in communications of this sort and in computer-mediated communication in general can bear little resemblance to that found in handwritten letters or in printed Japanese. Eccentric spelling, non-standard use of orthography (often intended to achieve different phonetic effects), abbreviation and code-like subcultural texting practices have become prominent features of texting and e-mail between friends.

The question thus becomes, what does it mean to be literate in Japanese today? Leaving aside considerations of the non-orthography-related aspects of what makes good writing, which are
built into curricula from the first to the final years of schooling: from the point of view of orthography, a student must have mastered at the very least the two kana syllabaries and the 1,945 Characters for General Use, have learned the readings each character is assigned in specific contexts, be familiar with characters and their readings as used in personal and place names, recognize and be able to use the western alphabet and Arabic numerals, and generally be able to read newspapers, books, and other kinds of non-specialist material. It takes Japanese students nine to twelve years to achieve this standard. In addition, for the millions of people who use text messages and e-mail from their cell phones, an extra dimension is added in that they must be able to produce and to recognize the kind of abbreviated, often funny variants of accepted orthographic usage perforce required by the limited interface of the cell phone. And for migrant children, it means achieving literacy in a second language whose orthographic requirements are often unlike any they have encountered before.

Such requirements are substantial, and surveys have shown that even the first of them – mastery of the socially sanctioned orthographic norms – is not always achieved to the extent that educational policymakers might wish. A 1988 survey by Japan’s National Language Research Institute, for example, found that students in three prefectures drawn from the differing levels of school education could read characters better than they could write them and that knowledge of character readings was variable. Taylor and Taylor have examined the kinds of errors students make in reading and writing kanji and have concluded that “the mastery of Kanji by Japanese students and adults is far from perfect, despite the effort and time expended on it” (Taylor and Taylor 1995: 353). In 2006, the Japan Kanji Aptitude Testing Foundation found that one in four adult respondents reported being unable to give a correct answer when asked about a kanji by a child; 85 percent reported that their ability with characters had decreased over recent years, a situation blamed by one analyst on the fact that exposure to kanji through books and newspapers had been replaced today by television and computers. A GOO Research survey of 2007 found that of the 52 percent of respondents who were not confident about their levels of kanji proficiency, almost three-quarters attributed this to the fact that they did most of their writing on computers or cell phones rather than by hand. And finally, the 2003 Agency for Cultural Affairs survey on language use found that almost 80 percent of respondents felt that computers and cell phones were having an effect on the way they write. Not surprisingly, considering the complexity of the writing system, therefore, levels of state-sanctioned literacy achieved and then maintained are often not up to the expectations of educators, but it continues to be taken for granted that the levels stipulated in the policies and curriculum guidelines are in fact achieved.

The nature of contemporary literacy is thus a growing issue affected by both technology and immigration. In theory, the language used by an educated person will be Standard Japanese (hōjungo) in both speech and writing, and the script that he uses will conform to the norms taught during the period of compulsory education. In real life, of course, no such thing occurs: while the norms may be followed in certain contexts, in everyday speech and writing (which now includes text messaging and computer-mediated forms of communication), they are subverted on a daily basis. Whether language policies relating to script should change from their present orientation, based on handwriting, the norm at the time most were formulated, to a greater recognition of the realities of technology-mediated writing is a matter currently under discussion by the National Language Subdivision of the Council for Cultural Affairs (Bunka Shingikai). Prompted by the Agency for Cultural Affairs survey results mentioned above, the knowledge that electronic dictionaries in computers and cell phones contain over 6,000 characters (a figure predicted soon to rise to over 10,000), and the beginning of a trend for newspapers to use characters not on the List of Characters for General Use, this body has set up
a working party on kanji to examine whether the existing kanji policy is still appropriate in the information era (Agency for Cultural Affairs 2007b) and has recently put forward a proposal for a slightly expanded version of the list.

The increase in immigration since the 1980s also adds a new dimension to discussions of literacy not hitherto experienced to any significant extent in Japan, namely the issue of JSL literacy for migrant children. In a climate of increased immigration, the relationship between immigrant literacy and potential citizenship becomes an important issue. Access to writing can equate to access to information, though perhaps not in the way it once did before the television age. Will the intricate Japanese writing system prove to be a barrier to full literacy for migrants in general, and in particular for those who decide to take Japanese citizenship? If what it means to be a citizen in Japan is to be someone who “actively participates in the life of the society and is successful there,” then access to information via the written language is essential. The official but untested discourse on literacy, which puts Japan’s illiteracy rate at close to zero, incorporates the “commonsense” belief that all real Japanese know how to read and that those who do not cannot become Japanese (Galan 2005: 264, 265). One possibility suggested by Galan is that time may bring the emergence of a second-class category of citizenship occupied by those whose literacy skills do not include full mastery of the written language.

**Romanization?**

One issue often raised by people outside Japan, particularly in regard to computers, is romanization: whether Japan is ever likely to abandon its current script and adopt the western alphabet in its place, as happened in Vietnam. Scholars such as Unger (1987, 1996) and Hannas (1997, 2003) have argued variously that computers need an alphabet which enables rapid touch-typing and that Japan’s current orthography is too unwieldy to function successfully in this regard. Hannas (1997), for example, contends that because computers were developed to meet the needs of languages using the alphabet, it is simply not possible to adapt them successfully to the needs of East Asian languages which use characters, and that romanization is therefore the only sensible option for such languages now that we live in the computer age.

As anyone who has tried it will know, it is certainly true that inputting Japanese on a computer is slower than using the alphabet, mainly because of the conversion stages required: although users input romanized Japanese (rōmaji) using an alphabet keyboard, it is automatically converted to hiragana as they type and from there must be converted to kanji. Even with sophisticated artificial intelligence built into the conversion process today, this takes longer than the one-stage operation of typing in the alphabet. A side effect of this practice of using the alphabet daily as an important intermediary step in electronically generating text in Japanese (done because if the number of keys rises above 40, as it does with kana, it becomes much more difficult to touch-type) is that “this generation of electronically savvy students is at home with rōmaji in a way that previous generations were not” (Kess and Miyamoto 1999: 111–12). Nevertheless, there is no evidence of any widespread will to dispense with the traditional script on that account, and in any case further development of voice-recognition technology may take over from keyboard input in the long run.

It is highly unlikely that Japan will seriously consider adopting romanization in the foreseeable future. With one of the world’s largest publishing and printing industries, and newspaper circulation figures that far surpass those of the United States or the United Kingdom, the infrastructure costs and the amount of work involved in the practical mechanics of changing away from the multi-script system to the alphabet would be immense. To this must be added the enduring affective attachment to the existing orthography and the role that it has played in
national language ideology in the past. Except among some small interest groups, which have been urging romanization since the 1880s, the arguments advanced in favor of the gains in educational and corporate efficiency that adopting the alphabet would bring have never been found sufficiently persuasive to warrant serious consideration. The major use of the alphabet in Japan today is therefore as a versatile adjunct to the official scripts, and it is much in evidence as a decorative feature in advertising and magazines, where it stands out sufficiently from the surrounding scripts to catch the reader’s eye. Perhaps, in time, with generational change and as technology-mediated communication becomes ever more sophisticated, and if the current strongest-ever government push to promote the teaching of English continues, attitudes to romanization may undergo a change, but that seems likely to be far in the future.

English in Japan

Large ethnic communities within Japan speak Korean, Chinese, and Portuguese. Outside these and other ethnic communities, however, other languages – except for English – are not widely spoken or studied. The indigenous and formerly endangered Ainu language has been the subject of revival attempts since the passing of the Ainu Cultural Promotion Act in 1997, but most learners in government-sponsored Ainu-language classes today are mainstream Japanese rather than Ainu children. (See Siddle, Chapter 12, for information about ethnic minorities in Japan.)

English has been Japan’s predominant foreign language since the modern period began in 1868, replacing the former emphasis on Dutch during the period of national isolation when Japan’s only official contact with the outside world was with a Dutch trading post in Nagasaki harbor. Since being introduced in middle schools as an elective subject in 1947, English has occupied a de facto prominent place in the study profiles of students wishing to progress to higher levels of education, because many university degrees incorporate a foreign-language study requirement and thus high school and university entrance exams have focused on English. English did not actually become de jure compulsory in government middle and high schools until 2002, but long before that it was taken by almost all students, so that high school graduates have studied the language for six years. English conversation classes have been available as an elective activity at public elementary schools since 1997; by 2005, 93.6 percent of schools had taken up this option (MEXT 2006). Beginning April 2011, the study of English became compulsory in elementary schools for grades five and six, based upon a recommendation by the Foreign Language Division of the Central Council for Education.

The ramifications of teaching English as a compulsory second language have been multifaceted. For one thing, the influx of foreign loanwords, mostly English, has been attributed in part to the fact that although Japanese students after six years of English instruction historically cannot speak the language with any degree of proficiency, they can and do throw around English words instead of their Japanese equivalents. The perceived overuse of loanwords can cause difficulties for older Japanese: the 1999 Agency for Cultural Affairs survey of language matters, for example, found that almost half the respondents had encountered loanwords they did not understand in everyday conversation. Former Prime Minister Koizumi Jun’ichirō in 2002 requested that the National Institute for Japanese Language set up a committee to address this matter; the committee subsequently issued four reports recommending that certain loanwords be replaced with their Japanese equivalents. In some cases, however, it proved impossible to suggest Japanese terms owing to the rapid influx of new terminology from English, particularly in the information technology, health, and welfare sectors (Torikai 2005).

Many of Japan’s top companies, among them Fujitsu, IBM Japan, and Nissan, provide in-house English tutorials and require that employees at certain levels of appointment speak English.
Increasingly, companies and local governments are adopting performance on English tests such as TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication) as a criterion for both employment and promotion (Torikai 2005: 253). At IBM Japan, for instance, section chiefs have required a minimum TOEIC score of 600 points (usable business English) for the last six years, with assistant general manager positions requiring a higher score of at least 730 (able to communicate in any situation).

English is therefore occupying a more and more prominent position in Japan, and the government, under the rubric of internationalization, has been pumping money for the last 20 years into improving the manner in which it is taught. Because of the strictures of the university entrance exams, with their emphasis on multiple-choice questions and lack of any listening component until 2006, the traditional teaching method has been grammar-translation, focusing on the written language at the expense of developing oral skills. In an effort to switch to a more communicative teaching approach, the JET program was set up in 1987 in response to Japan’s poor showing in comparative international rankings of TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) performance. This program, still performing strongly, provides Japanese teachers of English with native-speaker assistant language teachers (ALTs) to assist them with communicatively oriented activities in middle and high school classrooms. Although Japan’s TOEFL performance did not in fact improve as a result, the JET program when it was evaluated in 2001 received glowing reports from participant schools in terms of increased student interest and the all-important willingness to engage in speaking English.

The next step in the campaign to improve English proficiency came in 2003 with MEXT’s implementation of a five-year action plan premised on the need to improve the ability of Japanese people to communicate on the world stage so that Japanese opinions and ideas could better be heard beyond the country’s borders. The focus here changed from a one-way communicative emphasis on understanding foreigners to a vision of two-way communication in which Japanese people can make their opinions known using a foreign language. This plan saw a targeted budget subvention made for the first time, an indication of the high priority accorded it by government. The action plan set out very detailed steps through which its objectives were to be realized. These included the establishment of special high schools with immersion or semi-immersion programs in English (known as the SELHis, or Super English Language High Schools), proficiency-oriented streaming of students, and a much greater use of English in the classroom, with much smaller class sizes, which of course necessitated increases in teacher numbers and rapid expansion of curriculum material.

It might seem, then, that Japan is well down the road to having English as an unofficial second language, regardless of official policy on that matter. Japan’s Goals in the 21st Century: The Frontier Within (Prime Minister’s Commission on Japan’s Goals in the 21st Century 2000), a report commissioned by then-Prime Minister Obuchi Keizō on options for Japan’s future, did in fact suggest that sometime in the future Japan might consider adopting English as an official second language, an idea that provoked considerable debate at the time in both newspapers and the scholarly literature. Some supported the idea of a second official language, arguing that English was of great value to Japan, while others strongly attacked the proposal, viewing it as a form of English linguistic nationalism likely to create a social wedge in Japan between those proficient in English and those not. English is viewed in the policy documents very much as a foreign language rather than a second language, i.e. it is for communication with foreigners who do not speak Japanese, not for use between Japanese within Japan itself.

Regardless of whether a language that is thought of in this light could in time become an official language, English is now entrenched in Japanese education and employment practices. It would be a mistake, however, to conclude that public support for extending English instruction
to all levels of schooling is unanimous. It is certainly high – a 2005 Ministry-conducted opinion poll, for example, found that 71 percent of parents supported compulsory English education in elementary schools – but that same proposal has attracted criticism on the grounds that it will erode valuable time needed to achieve first-language literacy in the very complicated Japanese writing system, a view supported by former education minister Ibuki Bunmei.

Gender and language

Social norms surrounding language use may be explicit and overt, as formulated in language policies, or covert, in that they relate to the kind of expectations not openly articulated in policy documents but considered binding nonetheless. One non-policy area where expectations are frequently very strong relates to the gendered use of Japanese, in particular to the way in which “proper” Japanese women are expected to speak. This usually means the use of softer, gentler sentence endings than those used by men, greater use of honorifics and adherence to Standard Japanese. In practice, however, such expectations are very much subverted in everyday life, and a growing body of research and scholarship documents and analyzes the manner in which Japanese women, either consciously or not, depart from the stereotypical norms of “women’s language.”

While the traditional view of “women’s language” as a natural, static, and historically entrenched feature of language present from Japan’s earliest times remains strong in some quarters, in others, it has given way to a view of “women’s language” as a construct of modernity or premodernity, an imposed category rather than something innate. Recent studies with a strongly empirical bent rather than the more speculative work that has hitherto marked this field have delved into the language use of women in a widely disparate array of occupational and personal situations and have shown that the ideology of feminine speech does not resonate with the reality of their lived experiences. Research has found that in many cases women parody the prevailing norms of gendered speech – the burikko (acting cute/feminine) phenomenon – to achieve ends of their own, whether that be in work situations or in personal relationships, while their normal manner of speaking bears little relationship to those norms. Expectations of masculine language – “men’s speech” – have likewise been shown to be nowhere near as monolithically present as the discourse of textbooks, media stereotypes, and older sociolinguistic studies not based on empirical research might imply.

One particular aspect of gendered language use that has attracted attention in both the popular media and the academic research literature is the speech of a particular subculture of young women known as kogyaru (kogals). Kogals are in their teens or early twenties and seek to subvert the norms of language use to challenge mainstream perceptions of how women should speak, write, and behave. Gal writing (gyaru moji) in text messaging provides a particularly extreme example of this trend by cutting up characters into component parts and mixing them with other symbol sets and the alphabet to create a code that only members of the in-group can understand. Gal-talk earns headshakes from older people, who often tend to see non-standard uses of language as symptomatic of a decline in the overall well-being of society in general; this is particularly true in Japan, where books, articles, and letters to the editor frequently comment disapprovingly on “disorder in the language” (kotoba no midare). (For more on gendered language, see LeBlanc, Chapter 9.)

Conclusion

As we can see in all the cases described above, some of the current norms of language ideology are now under sustained challenge from a variety of quarters. The early twenty-first century in
Japan is providing us with an exciting example of a society in which mid-twentieth-century language norms are being increasingly eroded by contemporary practice and recent social and technological developments. It will be interesting to observe how language ideology evolves in Japan to encompass these changes and how protracted that evolution might turn out to be. On the one hand, perhaps the debates will mirror the bitter battles over script policy seen in the first half of the twentieth century; on the other, perhaps not, as increasing globalization opens up new ways of thinking about language and nation not experienced in Japan until now.

**Further reading**


