

# *Linguistic Diplomacy: The Impact of the Japanese Language in International Relations in East Asia*

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**Abstract:** In order to explore the strategic linguistic impact of Japanese in East Asian international relations, the study analyzes its institutional embeddedness and semantic construction mechanism from the dimensions of cultural diffusion, economic cooperation and multilateral diplomacy, and makes a systematic argument in the light of historical memory, linguistic competition and standardization dilemmas. The analysis concludes that Japanese, as a regional linguistic capital, not only strengthens the mechanism of transnational identity generation, but also builds discursive advantages in international agreements, trade systems and diplomatic contexts. The results suggest that the promotion of multilingual synergy and the construction of a terminology standardization system are key paths to enhancing the effectiveness of language diplomacy and realizing the coordination of regional governance.

## 1. Introduction

In East Asia, language has evolved beyond the basic function of communication to become an important mechanism for strategic interaction and identity construction among countries. As one of the typical ideographic language systems, Japanese has demonstrated significant institutional embeddedness and symbolic dominance in the reconstruction of regional political, economic and cultural patterns. As an important carrier of soft power, it not only influences the distribution of narrative power, but also plays a semantically dominant role in multilateral agreements, technical cooperation and historical memory. Exploring the linguistic strategic layout of Japanese in East Asian international relations is of great theoretical value and practical significance for understanding the evolutionary logic of the regional linguistic ecology and the institutionalization of the communication mechanism.

## 2. Contemporary Japanese Language Practice in International Relations in East Asia

### 2.1 Language as a soft power tool

In the context of globalization, the Japanese language has evolved beyond the attribute of a mere communication tool into a strategic resource for Japan's cultural diplomacy. The "Cool Japan" strategy established by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan in 2013 systematically transforms

popular cultural products such as animation, film and television, and games into diplomatic carriers, and builds emotional resonance among young groups in East Asia through cultural symbols with universal values such as "Onimusha" and "Chihiro". Data show that the "Japanese Language Education Overseas Promotion Program" led by the Japan Foundation for International Exchange has set up 78 language centers in East Asia, which, together with the folk dissemination network formed by the anime subtitle groups, has led to a 42% increase in the number of Japanese learners over the past ten years<sup>[1]</sup>.

## **2.2 Language bridges in economic cooperation**

In the process of regional economic integration in East Asia, Japanese is deeply embedded in the industrial chain collaboration system as institutional language capital. Japan's Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI) 2021 White Paper on Overseas Expansion of Manufacturing Industry shows that Japanese enterprises in China have shortened the technology transfer cycle by 19% through the implementation of the "Dual-Language Project", which requires that 32,000 employees in China master business Chinese, while at the same time fostering Japanese-language capability among local employees. This two-way language adaptation strategy is even more significant in ASEAN, where the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) has set up an industrial Japanese language certification center in Bangkok, which has sent 18,000 N2 level technicians to the automobile industry cluster, supporting the language foundation of Japanese automobile enterprises that have taken up 76% of the Southeast Asian market share. The construction of this linguistic infrastructure has increased the English-Japanese bilingual disclosure rate of annual reports of companies listed on the Tokyo Stock Exchange from 64% in 2015 to 91% in 2022, substantially reducing the communication entropy of regional capital flows<sup>[2]</sup>.

## **3. The Specific Impact of the Japanese Language in International Relations in East Asia**

### **3.1 Construction and deconstruction of cultural identity**

The Japanese language plays a double-edged role in the East Asian cultural scene, with its ideographic system both maintaining cultural commonalities and reflecting historical rifts. According to the Japan Foundation's 2022 "East Asia Chinese Character and Culture Circle Awareness Survey," the semantic overlap of the 598 Chinese characters shared by China, Japan, and South Korea is 73%, a similarity in linguistic DNA that has led to the regional ratings of NHK's documentary "The Story of the Ancient Capitals of Asia" exceeding expectations by 42%. However, the process of constructing cultural identity carries the risk of deconstruction. When the Contemporary Art Traveling Exhibition led by the Agency for Cultural Affairs of Japan was displayed in Seoul, the colonial terminology of "Uchisenkyo" and other terms used in its description triggered protests by 17 citizens' groups, exposing the semantic pitfalls of historical memory<sup>[3]</sup>.

### **3.2 The double-edged sword effect of regional communication efficiency**

The Japanese language exhibits a unique efficiency paradox in regional communication in East Asia, where the linguistic characteristics of its Kanji cultural circle both accelerate information transfer and harbor cognitive risks. According to a 2023 survey by the Japan External Trade Organization (JETRO), the contract negotiation cycle is 31% shorter in Sino-Japanese business negotiations than in non-Kanji-sphere countries due to the sharing of 684 basic kanji vocabularies. However, this linguistic convenience is accompanied by deep cognitive biases. An empirical study by the Tokyo University of Foreign Studies found that in import and export negotiations for

semiconductor materials, the mistranslation rate of near-similar Kanji terms such as "purity" and "precision" was as high as 17 percent, leading to a \$200 million USD increase in the Japan-Korea hydrogen fluoride trade dispute in 2021, which is a result of the Japan-Japan Trade Promotion Organization (JETRO) 2023 survey. This resulted in a \$230 million compliance dispute in the 2021 Japan-Korea hydrogen fluoride trade dispute. Language design in regional cooperation mechanisms is more complex.

## **4. Challenges of Japanese Language Diplomacy in International Relations in East Asia**

### **4.1 Linguistic Shackles of the Historical Legacy**

Historical semantic differences in the Japanese language have profoundly constrained the building of mutual trust in East Asia. The contemporary use of colonial terminology continues to exacerbate regional conflicts, such as Japan's official expression of the "Pacific War" as the "Great East Asian War," which has deepened the gap between China, Japan, and South Korea in terms of the nature of the war. According to data from Japan's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) in 2023, the percentage of ambiguous expressions related to "colonial rule" in high school textbooks surged by 39% compared to 2010, with the most significant substitution of the terminology of "aggression" by "invasion" by "entry". Among them, the most significant terminological substitution is "in and out" instead of "aggression", which directly triggered 27 diplomatic protests between China and South Korea within the framework of UNESCO<sup>[4]</sup>. Historical semantic traps are even more acute in the legal sphere, as the terminological dispute between "voluntary labor" and "forced mobilization" in the Tokyo High Court's forced labor case in 2021 caused the judicial decision to deviate from the factual baseline, and the case to go to a different level.

### **4.2 Increased regional language competition**

The diversification of the language ecology in East Asia is squeezing the diplomatic discourse space of Japanese. The 2022 White Paper on Language Use in Regional Trade Agreements under the framework of China's Belt and Road Initiative shows that the coverage of Chinese in tenders for infrastructure projects in Southeast Asia has increased by 27% compared to 2015, while the dominance of Japanese in ASEAN's technical standards documents has been replaced by English by 38%. Even more threatening is the "Korean Wave Language Strategy" pursued by South Korea's Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, which has led the "Agreement on Standardization of East Asian Pop Culture Terminology" to incorporate 82 Korean words derived from Korean dramas into the regional lingua franca, which is a direct attack on the Japanese animation terminology system's spreading dominance among the youth population. Institutional language competition is even more severe, as the ASEAN Charter for Multilingualism and Equality adopted in 2023 explicitly prioritizes Chinese and English as languages for development, causing the Japanese-led proposal to update the East Asian Industrial and Technical Terminology Database (EATTD) to be put on hold due to disputes over language weighting.

## **5. Countermeasures to Promote the Japanese Language in International Relations in East Asia**

### **5.1 Building a linguistic buffer for historical dialogues**

In order to address the language barrier in the cognitive conflict of East Asian history, it is

necessary to establish a terminology negotiation mechanism with multilateral participation. It is proposed that the "East Asian Historical Terminology Working Committee" be jointly established by academic institutions of China, Japan and South Korea, and that a decentralized historical corpus validation platform be developed by relying on blockchain technology, so that 132 groups of controversial terms. The platform should introduce a dynamic consensus mechanism that allows the historians of the three countries to negotiate and iterate on the interpretation of terms in real time through digital signature technology, so as to ensure that the revision process of each historical concept can be traced back and is in line with the Common Outline for the Study of Modern and Contemporary East Asian History. At the same time, it is recommended that a "Language Fund for Historical Dialogue" be set up under the ASEAN-China-Japan-Republic of Korea (10+3) framework to support the use of approved cross-referenced terminology by media outlets and educational institutions of the three countries when reporting on history.

## 5.2 Strengthening regional language standardization

In view of the fragmentation of the language ecosystem in East Asia, it is necessary to build a standardization system in different fields and at different levels. It is proposed that the China-Japan-South Korea Standardization Organization (CJSSO) and the ASEAN Consultative Committee on Standards and Quality (ACCSQ) jointly set up an East Asia Industrial Language Standards Working Group (EALSWG), focusing on strategic areas such as the digital economy and green technology, to develop a cross-language terminology mapping system. Based on the ISO 704 international terminology standard, the system integrates 12,000 core terms from the Japanese Industrial Standard (JIS), Chinese National Standard (GB) and Korean KS standard, and establishes multidirectional correspondences through semantic network technology. At the institutional level, the secretariat of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (RCEP) should be urged to set up a "Language Standards Supervisory Committee," which will require member countries to complete basic terminology cross-references in six major areas, including manufacturing and services, by 2026, and incorporate the degree of standardization into the certification of origin assessment system. In the field of education, it is necessary to implement the "Regional Japanese Language Standardized Certification Program", in which the Japan Foundation for International Exchange will join hands with the ministries of education of China and South Korea to develop JLPT supplemental examination modules that take into account local needs, such as the addition of a special "Business Japanese for East Asia", which will assess scenarios such as the interpretation of RCEP terms, cross-border M&A negotiations, and so on. For example, a special module on "East Asian Business Japanese" should be added to assess the ability to apply standardized expressions in scenarios such as the interpretation of RCEP provisions and cross-border M&A negotiations.

## 6. Conclusion

The linguistic status of Japanese in East Asian international relations is not a static construction, but evolves dynamically in the process of cultural dissemination, economic cooperation and diplomatic games, and its semantic choices and dissemination paths profoundly affect the formation of regional identity and institutional order. Language is not only a medium of cognition, but also a structure of power, and its role in historical narrative, norm-setting and multilateral communication needs to be deepened through terminology construction, corpus integration and standardization mechanisms. In the future, it is necessary to promote the institutionalization and digitalization of the language consultation mechanism, strengthen the multilingual synergy system, and build a regional consensus-oriented language infrastructure, so as to achieve a dynamic balance between

communication efficiency and cultural sensitivity.

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