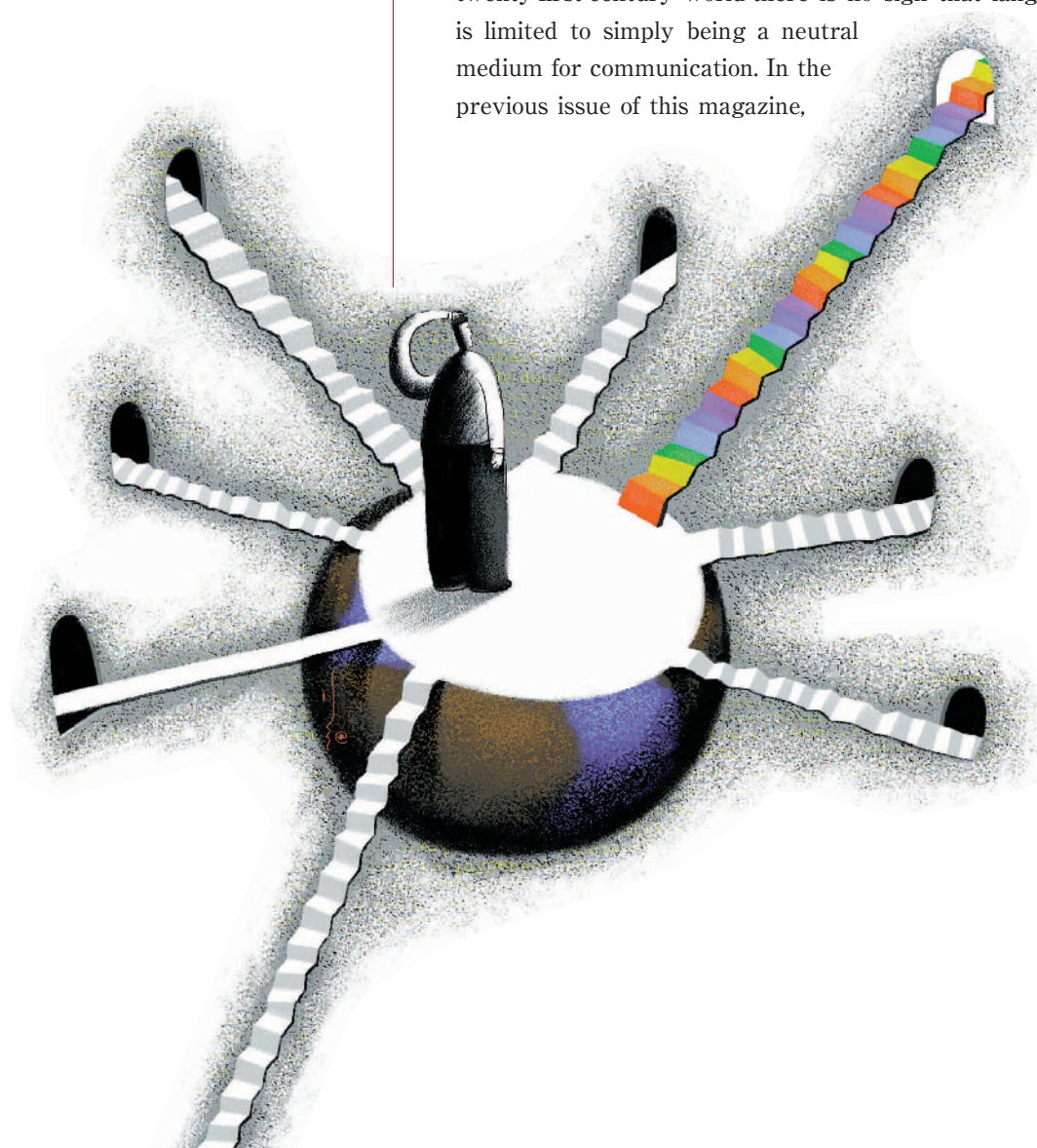


Language is something in which the social and cultural context are embedded
To acquire a language is to acquire a way of looking at the world

Language can become either a source of divisiveness or a bridge for dialogue

Everyone knows that we think using language and communicate with others through it. This unique characteristic is common to all human beings, but the ways in which people relate to their immediate linguistic environment are far from homogenous. For example, for us Japanese the Japanese language is like the air we breathe. Probably almost no one is particularly conscious of the fact that we are using Japanese. But if you look at other countries and regions, there are quite a number of places where linguistic issues have become a major social problem. In fact, in many cases this has escalated into full-scale ethnic conflict. It must be said, however, that to see linguistic diversity as inevitably being a cause of intergroup conflict is too superficial a perspective. While it can serve as a source of divisiveness between groups, it can also serve as a bridge for dialogue between them. To acquire a language is to acquire a particular way of looking at the world and a means of expressing what one feels.

Actually, if you look at human history-and even in our twenty-first-century world-there is no sign that language is limited to simply being a neutral medium for communication. In the previous issue of this magazine,



Professor Kunio Tsunekawa of the Graduate School of Language and Society spoke of Creole languages and the tendency to view them as “second class, inferior and hybrid idioms.” In this way language becomes the object of social values from various directions, and also comes to wield its own social power. Languages function only through the incorporation of their sociocultural contexts. It is not the case that social factors are “reflected” in language by the infiltration of “impure” elements from outside the linguistic realm; rather, a variety of social forces are latent in language, and can manifest in diverse forms.

The anxiety of not understanding, The danger of assuming one does

The “Japanese language” we normally use without really thinking about is actually a product of Japanese modernization in the Meiji period (1868-1912). Upon careful examination, the concept of a national language reveals many things about the state of that nation and other factors such as the characteristics of its regional cultures. I think the possibility of grasping language in this way to explicate the structure of a nation is one of the things that make sociolinguistics, the discipline exploring the relationship between language and society, so fascinating.

Japan is often thought of as being ethnically and linguistically homogenous, but this is not true. In fact, this gap between perception and reality can be seen as something that has led to a lack of awareness of minority issues and linguistic policy. The EU, which seems to add a new official language each time it adds a new member, may be an extreme example, but we are living in an age in which globalization is advancing and it has become quite common for people from a diversity of countries, regions, and ethnicities to live and work in Japan. We need to start thinking more seriously about issues such as linguistic policy and language rights (the right to learn one's heritage language). For example, as an issue involv-

ing language rights, the children of Brazilian immigrants are losing their ability to speak Portuguese. Language is not something acquired without effort; an environment conducive to it must be provided through education.

When confronted with someone who does not speak the same language, people tend to become anxious. Moreover, they may judge people from a different linguistic background with their own notion of what constitutes “common sense.” Both of these are common enough occurrences, but what is important is to take a good look at ourselves and realize when we are doing this. If we are feeling uneasy, we should ask ourselves why, and we should question our unconscious assumptions about common sense. Efforts such as these will develop our ability to understand others. One of the most difficult things is to know what we don't understand - and the approach to this begins with finding out how much we do understand. Neither language nor society is fixed. The capacity to enter into their continually changing dynamism and explore it is something that I believe resides in the ability to question and reevaluate oneself.

In closing, let me say a word or two about the Graduate School of Language and Society (GSLS). One characteristic of GSLS is that we have a large number of students whose goal is to graduate with a Master's degree and pursue careers outside academia. Because of this, we emphasize, in addition to intellectual exploration of the relationship between language and society, the acquisition of skills that can be applied in the real world—bibliographic research, report and thesis writing, presentations, and so on. Another characteristic of GSLS is the many overseas students we have, as well as the large number of students who have come to us from other universities, domestic and foreign. The free atmosphere we provide for individuals to actively pursue the topics that interest them—Japanese-language education, for instance, or research on linguistic policies—is another very attractive aspect of the GSLS program that we are proud of.



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