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Exploring Ideology in Written Language: A
Translingual Approach
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Exploring Ideology in Written Language: A Translingual Approach

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Overview

There are power dynamics at play in spoken and written language. Language is wielded by people and institutions to exert power over others or to maintain the power they already possess. But power dynamics in language are not always obvious. For instance, one manifestation of power dynamics is in the form of ideologies which we attach to language, and which impact how we view reality. Language ideologies disproportionately impact historically marginalized groups of people, so our students need to become critically aware of these harmful ideologies. When our students become critically aware language users, they not only become better citizens and allies, but they also work towards creating a more equitable society.

This translingual activity invites students to explore ideology in written language through an analysis of kanji characters. To clarify, “translingual” in the context of this activity refers to meaning-making which occurs across and beyond named languages. This activity’s focus on ideologies stems from translingual scholars’ work which troubles boundaries and static depictions of language deriving from the ideology of monolingualism. Ideologies like monolingualism (and others) advantage those who are already in positions of power.

Kanji is a logographic script that writers deploy with two or more phonetic scripts in Japanese writing. It derives from Chinese characters which were brought to Japan beginning in the 1st century CE (Frellesvig). In this activity, students analyze a list of kanji characters which are broken down into their radical (semantic) and additional components. To illustrate, the kanji 好 (like) is divided into

its component parts: the radical 女 (woman), and addition 子 (child). Students analyze characters in this manner to discover possible connotations about power relationships in the logograms and to gain a greater awareness thereby of the ways in which language is inherently ideological. For instance, by analyzing 好 (like) and other characters with the 女 (woman) radical, students recognize a gender bias. Finally, students connect what they have learned about ideology in kanji to the English language by engaging with discussion questions at the bottom of the activity prompt. In this way, students draw analogies between English and kanji, thereby becoming more critically aware language users. This activity builds students' metalinguistic awareness while 1) informing them about non-alphabetic writing technologies and 2) de-centering alphabetic literacies (Cushman).

This activity works best as part of a larger unit on language and power, representation, language ideologies, or a similar topic. Scaffolding for this assignment will take the form of readings and/or class discussions assigned at least one class session prior the activity.

Time Commitment

30 minutes

Materials

Students should bring a pen and paper or laptop to write answers to the questions on the handout. They should also bring notes from discussions and readings leading up to this activity.

Activity Process

- Students will read an article or essay exploring one or more of the following concepts related to cultural studies: connotation and denotation, binaries, and the Other. These concepts serve as useful tools for students to analyze the kanji characters on the handout. Stuart Hall's "The Spectacle of

the Other” (2013) would be a good choice to cover all three of these concepts. This reading assignment will take place before the class session as homework.

- Next, students will discuss the reading and/or answer questions on the reading either in-person or through a forum on a learning management system such as Blackboard. This discussion will take place prior to the activity either online or in class.
- Students will then receive the kanji activity handout and write answers to questions directly on the prompt or input them into a Word document on their laptops.
- Finally, students will gather together in small groups to discuss their answers to questions on the activity handout before transitioning into a full class discussion.

Learning Outcomes

Students engaging in this activity will:

- Gain an understanding of “the relationships among language, knowledge, and power” (Council of Writing Program Administrators)
- Think critically about their own, and others’ language practices
- Gain an understanding of how all language is ideological
- Gain an understanding of, and appreciation for, how non-alphabetic writing systems operate
- Think critically about how writing is multimodal

Learning Accommodations

- Students may choose whether they would like to use pen and paper or their laptops for this activity.
- Material should be presented in multiple formats to include in-person instruction and asynchronous, digital delivery.

Works Cited

Council of Writing Program Administrators [with responses by Keith Rhodes; Mark Wiley; Kathleen Blake Yancey]. "The WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition." *Writing Program Administration*, vol. 23, no. 1-2, 1999, pp. 59-66.

Cushman, Ellen. "Translingual and decolonial approaches to meaning making." *College English*, vol. 78, no. 3, 2016, pp. 234-242.

Frellesvig, Bjarke. *A History of the Japanese Language*. Cambridge University Press, 2010.

Hall, Stuart. "The Spectacle of the Other." *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. 2nd ed. Sage Publications, 2013, pp. 223-290.

Further Reading

Hio, Yasuko. "Female-Male Inequality in Japanese Writing." *Hearing Many Voices*, edited by Anita Taylor and M.J. Hardman, 1999, pp. 157-171.

Takemaru, Naoko. "Japanese Women's Perceptions of Sexism in Language." *Women and Language*, vol. 28, no. 1, 2005, pp. 39-48.

Taylor, I., & Taylor, M. M. (2014). "Kanji: Chinese Characters." *Writing and literacy in Chinese, Korean and Japanese: Revised Edition*, vol. 14, edited by Insup Taylor and M. Martin Taylor, John Benjamins Publishing, 2014, pp. 271-283.

Appendix: Kanji Activity

[Note: This activity does not aim to single out the Japanese written language for criticism—indeed, ideology obtains in all languages. Instead, the lessons learned from this activity are applicable to all language contexts because language is inherently social, and language changes accordingly throughout the years.]

Background: Kanji is an early multimodal writing technology that derives from Chinese characters which were brought to Japan beginning in the 1st century CE (Frellesvig 2010). Kanji is a logographic system, or one that uses symbols to represent words or morphemes (the smallest meaningful unit of language)—as opposed to a phonetic, or sound system, such as the English alphabet.

How it works: Many kanji characters can stand alone to mean something and also be a part of other characters. The character *ki* (tree) [木], is one of these kanji characters. If it stands alone, it means tree, but if it gets repeated three times like this 森, it becomes *mori* (forest) [森]. We would say that *ki* (tree) [木] is a radical. It shows up in other characters (森, 机, 板, etc.).

For Exploration: The character for woman, *onna* (woman) [女], is also a radical. Let's look at some common characters with the *onna* (woman) [女] radical.

女	+	少	=	妙
Woman		Few		Exquisite

女	+	亡	=	妄
Woman		Deceased		Delusion

女	+	干	=	奸
Woman		Dry		Wickedness

女 + 石 = 妬
Woman Stone Jealous

女 + 女 + 女 = 姦
Woman Woman Woman Adultery

女 + 又 = 奴
Woman Again Slave

What do these kanji examples demonstrate about power in the Japanese language?

Can you think of any similar examples in English?

The symbol *otoko* (man) [男] never comes up as a radical in other characters. Why do you think this occurs?

Many of the above kanji characters have been replaced in recent kanji dictionaries. These replacement characters do not contain the [女] radical. What do you think the thinking was behind these decisions? Can you think of similar examples occurring in English or other languages? What do these decisions say about language and society?