Amazing!: A construction of foreigner stereotypes in Japanese anime

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Introduction
In language learning/teaching, culture is very important. However, in the context of teaching Japanese language, we need to be mindful not to be dictated by *nihonjinron*, or the theory of Japanese. Particularly popular back in the 70s and 80s, *Nihonjinron* emphasizes the uniqueness and “purity” of Japanese language and people. Gottlieb (2005:4) nicely summarizes the essence of *nihonjinron* as the following:

> Japan is portrayed as linguistically homogeneous (i.e., Japanese is the only language spoken there), and the Japanese language itself as a uniquely difficult and impenetrable barrier even for the Japanese themselves, let alone non-Japanese learners of the language. In this view, race, language and culture are tied together and cannot be separated (Gottlieb 2005:4)

Such ideology driven “theory” has been heavily criticized in academia since the 1990s scholars such as by Sakai (1992) and Befu (1993). They argue that *nihonjinron* works as cultural nationalism that enforces social and political conformity by ignoring diversity and complexity of Japanese people, particularly, minorities in Japan. However, research shows that *nihonjinron* is still circulated and reproduced, particularly in popular media by iconizing “otherness” through the manipulation of linguistic and visual clues. For example, Yano (2011) criticizes a conflation of ethnicity and Japanese language in the 2002 NHK’s morning dorma, *Sakura*; the main character, *Sakura*, a fourth-generation Japanese-American and her Japanese-American family in Hawaii were all played by Japanese actors and spoke fluent Japanese, thereby erasing their hybridity. Similarly, other researchers remind us of problematic depictions of foreigners as imperfect Japanese speakers in the media. For example, Suzuki (2015) problematizes the commodification of non-Japanese speech on Japanese TV shows. She reports that a black African American was represented as a comedic figure due to her inability to read simple Japanese traffic signs despite the fact that she can speak fairly colloquial Japanese. Suzuki argues that such mediatization is tied to “Petit Nationalism Syndrome” (coined by Rika Kayama, 2002). That is, by laughing at “cute” errors made by foreigners’ “cute” errors, native Japanese speakers would “feel good” about themselves and the Japanese language.

But Japanese society is becoming more diverse. There were over 2.3 million foreign residents in Japan in the 2016 census, the highest in Japan’s history (Japan Ministry of Justice). Moreover,

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1 The research on Japanese language in popular media problematizes perpetuation of gender stereotypes and standard language ideology (e.g. Hiramoto 2009, 2010; Occhi et al. 2010; Shibaoto and Occhi 2009).
according to the Japan Foundation’s report, based on its 2015 survey, the number of Japanese learners in the United States have increased in the last 40 years. These facts challenge essentialized views of who speak the Japanese language.

Taking the various studies and data regarding foreign representation in Japan, we introduce a few key questions:

- How are foreigners depicted in Japanese anime?
- Are there any patterns in the construction of these foreign characters?
- How does the representation of foreign characters inform us about the influence of nihonjinron?

**Data & Methodology**

This study investigates how foreigners are constructed, reproduced, and contested through language and visual clues in anime that feature foreign characters. We decided to focus on this particular type of popular media because of its global appeal, particularly among young adults. In fact, many learners of Japanese are initially introduced to the Japanese language and culture by watching anime. More importantly, as Lippi-Green notes, analyzing animation is crucial to understanding the way a culture vies certain values, stating that:

> Animated films offer a unique way to study how a dominant culture reaffirms its control over subordinate cultures and nations by re-establishing, on a day-to-day basis, their preferred view of the world as right and proper and primary. Precisely because of animation’s (assumed) innocence and innocuousness, the filmmakers have a broader spectrum of tools available to them and a great deal more leeway (Lippi-Green 2012; 111).

Our first step was to pick what we wanted to watch. The only requirement for the shows that we chose was they had to have some sort of non-Japanese character in it. By having limited requirements, we are able to see the broader trends of how foreign characters are depicted, regardless of other potential factors such as genre or release date. After identifying the foreign characters, we transcribed and studied the script for different linguistic effects that work to isolate the foreign characters from the Japanese characters. We also recorded the physical appearance of each character to examine if the correlation between appearance and language works to build stereotypes of foreigners as well. The language use was consolidated into “standard Japanese use” (SJ) and “non-standard Japanese use” (NS). NS effects include, but are not limited to, native language insertion, mora deletion/insertion, overuse/misuse of sentence-final particles, and misuse of polite style speech (Yoda 2011). Therefore, even if a character only said one word in a foreign language, their language was immediately marked as NS. While 14 total countries were represented, the results were consolidated into more general categories, as some countries only had one or two characters and would not have shown the more significant trends across larger linguistic groups. The consolidated categories are: Americans, English speakers, Non-English speakers, Asian, and Unspecified for those whose nationality wasn’t stated within the show, but were clearly marked as different from the Japanese characters. Finally, when I was watching the shows, I noticed a pattern between the way foreigners were represented in anime that had many foreigners as opposed to shows with few foreigners. In order to accurately map this trend, we separated the characters who spoke NS and SJ into categories of shows with many characters vs. few characters.
Results
Out of 17 anime, we found 73 foreigner characters representing 14 different countries (as well as a category of “unspecified” foreigners). From this data, we compiled results based on both the character’s language usage and physical appearance.

Language
Linguistically, about 40% of characters spoke Standard Japanese and about 60% of characters spoke Non-Standard Japanese. However, this becomes more complicated as we distributed the results between the frequency of foreign characters in anime. Table 1 summarizes the language usage by show type. In shows with few foreign characters, 86% spoke non-standard Japanese, but in shows with more foreign characters it was almost an equal distribution of NS and SJ speakers. To break this down even more, please take a look at this chart that has our consolidated categories of nationalities cross tabulated with both NS and SJ foreigners and shows with many vs. few foreign characters. The biggest result that we observed was that 10 of the 15, or 67% of Americans were in anime with few foreigners and spoke non-standard Japanese. Interestingly enough, the only category that had a higher percentage of characters that spoke standard Japanese was the Asian category, where almost all of the characters appeared in shows with many foreign characters and 67% of the total Asian characters spoke SJ, which is the complete opposite of how Americans are depicted.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Many foreigners</th>
<th>Few foreigners</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SJ</td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>25</td>
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<td></td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>49%</td>
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Additionally, shows that featured many foreign characters had few Americans, but there were more characters in every other category represented overall. For example, out of 23 non-English speaking characters, 17 appear in anime with many characters, that accounts for 74% of non-English speaking characters. For Asian characters, 10 out of 12, or 83% of the characters appeared in anime with many foreigners. Finally, characters that whose nationality was unspoken, but were clearly marked as different, only appeared in anime with many foreigners in it. This result suggests that in situations where producers wish to have a single foreign representative in their show, they tend to use an American, but if they wish to have a show that’s either about foreigners or includes a large number of them, they are more willing to create characters representing many different nationalities. Additionally, if there is a situation where there is one foreigner among many Japanese people in a show, there tends to be a bias towards having that foreigner sound less educated, or less culturally ingrained, than the rest of the cast because of their marked Japanese. The only exception being other Asian characters having a higher capability of Japanese.
Appearance
The next thing we studied was the way foreigners are physically represented. The most telling thing when looking at the appearance of all of the characters as a whole is that they are overwhelmingly male. 60 out of 73 characters were male, that’s over 80% of the characters in this study. Additionally, over half of the women (8 out 13, or 61%) were sexualized by depicting them with revealing clothing or big breasts as a way of characterizing them, whereas it was not as common to do so for the men.

We also looked skin tone and hair color with nationality. Overall, it was most common to portray characters as white among all of the nationalities, with just under 65% of the characters depicted as white. These two charts depict the distribution of hair and skin color across each nationality. As you can see, the only nationality with an overwhelming amount of blonde people to non-blonde people was America, while the other European countries had either a more equal distribution, more non-blonde characters, or didn’t have enough characters represented to be considered consequential (Germany, France, Australia). Out of 15 Americans, 9 of them were white, all of which had blonde hair. The remaining 6 consisted of 5 African American characters and 1 Mexican American character, all of which had dark hair. For Chinese and other Asian characters, they would most commonly be depicted as fair-skinned with dark hair, but they would also have features that would differentiate them from Japanese and other foreign characters. The most common of which was to portray them with squinted eyes, but other ways of differentiation were to put them in traditional dress or a distinct hairstyle. If neither of these were present, the characters would be differentiated through speech, either using native language insertion or even aru-yo kotoba sentence patterns, a stereotype made of Chinese people during the late 19th century. (Kin-sui 2003, 187, 195).

We will show some examples to illustrate our points. This first video clip shows the character Jodie, an American woman in the anime Detective Conan.

[PLAY THE VIDEO CLIP (24 sec.). See below for the transcription.]

Yeees! ニッポンのゲームはどれもとれも beautiful で excising! もちろん America に入ってくる ニッポンのゲームも大人気。いつもいつもならんでいて順番が回ってきません。だーから、わらし、英語教師になったんです。まいにち、本場のゲーム enjoy 出来るからねー。

Jodie’s utterance contains:
- numerous simple English words (such as Yees, beautiful, & exciting),
- mora insertion (as in 回ってきません), and
- influence of American English phonological rule (i.e., the /t/ sound becomes a flapped /r/ in between two vowels, so totemo becomes toremo, and watashi becomes warashi).

Visually, Jodie is depicted as a white woman with blonde hair with blue eyes. She wears low cut outfit, thus, being sexualized despite the fact that Detective Conan must be targeting young children, not young adults. Moreover, Jodie highly praises about Japanese video games; her
remarks may make viewers feel good about the dominance of Japanese games in the global market.

The next example is a Russian character named Simon from the anime Durarara.
[PLAY THE VIDEO CLIP (41 sec.). See below for the transcription.]

S: おにさん、ひさしーぶり（LLHLL）。うーん。
K: よう！サイモン、ひさしぶりじゃんかよー。

K: あー、金ないから今日は勘弁！バイトして金入ったら空から。サービスしてよ！
S: Oh! だーめ。それしたら私、ロシアの大地のもくずに消えるよ。
K: 大地なのにもくずかよ？そんなじゃない。
S: おにさん、ひさしーぶり（LLHLL）

Here, we find that Simon’s speech is even more marked than Jodie’s Japanese:

• Use of “Oh!”—despite the fact that Simon is Russian, not American
• Mora insertion (as in いいよー、安いよいー。だーめ)
• Mora deletion (as in おにさん for お兄さん).
• Marked pitch patterns (as in ひさしーぶり as LLHLL contour not LHHHH)
• Semantic and pragmatic errors (as in 大地のもくず instead of 海のもくず) and use of casual style in greeting to customers, etc.

Additionally, we wonder why Simon is represented as a black person. It might be simple device to contrast him with Japanese characters. Simon is depicted as inadequate, less educated, or less culturally informed than surrounding Japanese characters through his visual and linguistic clues.

Discussion:

As we have seen, foreign character stereotypes are constructed and reproduced through marked Japanese and visual representation. Our biggest discoveries were that foreigners tend to be Americans, and they tend to be white with blond hair and blue eyes, and are unable to speak “proper” Japanese. The fact that Americans as default foreigners is not so surprising: after all, the U.S. has been dominant in post WWII Japan both politically, economically, and culturally. Our results resonate with Evans and Imai’s study (2011) on the perception of English language variety. For the Japanese college students that they surveyed, English means American English.

While the depictions of foreigners as white Americans with blond hair and blue eyes first appear to be “harmless,” we argue that they present serious problems because diversity and complexity of non-Japanese in the world are completely erased. In the context of U.S., how do Americans students who are not white, and don’t have blond hair and blue eyes feel about their identity as Americans, especially when American demography is rapidly changing towards more complex and nuanced? How do female students feel about sexualized depictions of female characters when the #MeToo movement is prevalent in the society? More importantly, how do they view the clearly marked non-fluent Japanese spoken by foreign characters? Do they perceive such representation as “cute” and “loveable” as Yoda (2011) suggests? We believe that our findings
encourage to examine anime critically. These are NOT a reflection of reality; rather, these are constructed to reflect a certain viewpoint. Thus, anime depictions is not “neutral” at all. Our results suggest the ideology of nihonjinron is operating behind the scene. It is only Japanese who can speak Japanese fluently. We believe that many students are aware of stereotypes in anime. For example, exaggerated high-pitch voice is a sign of “cute” or “young” female characters. We argues that it is equally important for our students to be able to notice foreigner stereotypes and ask critical questions as to why foreigners, particularly Americans, are depicted in a certain way.

There are a few practical ways in which our results may be incorporated in classroom teaching. First, many of us may assign films/anime for extra-curricular activities to familiarize students with Japanese language and culture. We could ask students to find film/anime with foreign characters, observe whether their speech is different from Japanese characters, and write a short response as an extra credit activity.

Another way is incorporating analysis of language in popular media into our language classes. For example, at St. Olaf, we use Tobira textbook for the third year level, and in one of the chapters examines different speech styles in Japanese. At the end of the chapter, I assign a mini-project in which students will examine a short segment of anime, film, or manga, in order to observe a pattern and speculate the effect. I could encourage students to consider looking specifically at the foreign characters’ speech styles. Through systematic observation, students will be able to see a constructed nature of media language.

Conclusion
The depiction of foreign characters in the anime that we analyzed reinforce the stereotypes that Japan holds of foreigners. As Lippi-Green points out, we can’t simply discard popular media as “just entertainment.” Instead, we need to have critical stance when discussing anime with learners of Japanese because anime “offers a unique way to study how a dominant culture reaffirms its control over subordinate cultures and nations.” Hopefully, such discussion will energize students to learn Japanese language and culture with a more critical viewpoint.

References:


**List of anime programs:**

Assassination Classroom (2015)
Black Butler (2008)
Cardcaptor Sakura (1998)
Cowboy Bebop (1998)
Detective Conan (1996)
Durarara!! (2010)
Eden of the East (2009)
Food Wars! (2015)
Free! (2013)
Hetalia (2009)
Jojo’s Bizarre Adventure (2012)
Joker Game (2015)
Lucky Star (2007)
Soul Eater (2008)
Steins;Gate (2011)
Yuri!!! on Ice (2016)