

# The Role of Language in the Definition of National Character: A Case Study of Identity Discourse in Contemporary Japan

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## Abstract

After the defeat in WWII the Japanese experienced a twenty-year period of identity crisis in which they searched for a new ideology that could enable them to face the threat of “spiritual vacuum” (Befu 2001), economic instability and strong criticisms from the West. In such a chaotic environment the identity discourse known as Nihonjinron (Theories on the Japanese) flourished and became hegemonic. Nihonjinron successfully dominates the Japanese panorama even now, thanks to the influence of academic and popular literature, mass media, a powerful cultural industry, politics, and a national, genuine interest for the “Japaneseness”. The discussion on the alleged Japanese uniqueness, that is, the existence of unbridgeable racial and cultural differences between the ‘Japanese’ and the ‘Other’ – the West – is precisely the core of Nihonjinron. As Dale (1986), Befu, Sugimoto (1986) and Yoshino (1992) argue, the underlying assumptions of Nihonjinron could be summed up as follows: a racial and cultural homogeneity of Japanese people; a conceptual equation between Nation/Race/Ethnicity/Language/Culture/Blood considered as monolithic, natural features, that is, a primordialist or essentialist perspective (Eriksen 2010, Geertz 1963); a “race thinking” or racialism; a belief in the validity of emic judgments only over etic analyses on Japaneseness and ethnocentrism. The historical roots of the Nihonjinron phenomenon can be traced back to the Meiji period (1868–1912), when the first theories on the origins of the Japanese nation emerged in reaction to the shocking encounter with the West and the introduction of Western science (Oguma 2002). Interestingly, the myth of a homogeneous, pure-blooded state-nation coexisted from its birth with another typology of nationalism, the so called ‘mixed nation theory’. This theory prevailed during the Taishō (1912–1926) and part of the Shōwa (1926–1989) periods until the 1945 defeat, serving as the basis of the multinational paradigm of the imperialistic and expansionistic ideology and as

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a justification of the aggressive expansionism into China. However, as a result of the surrender, the Japanese government could no longer advocate the logic of the past and the previous assimilationist discourse was abandoned. A vision of Japan as an isolated, remote and peaceful insular nation, homeland to no aliens but inhabited from time immemorial by a homogeneous and harmonious agricultural people, with no skill for war, was thus reactivated to serve in the new context. These images of Japanese identity based on a myth of homogeneity and on discourse of cultural exceptionalism culminated in the 1960s and 1970s, in correspondence with the economic growth and the gain of self-confidence in the international society. Moreover, despite the socioeconomical changes from the end of 1980s, Japan succeeded in adjusting her paradigm of cultural nationalism through the medium of cultural capitalism, as the spread of her soft power policies throughout the world shows. My contribution will focus on an outstanding example of *Nihonjinron*\* and of its temporal continuity, namely the works of Watanabe Shōichi (1930–2017), a professor emeritus of English literature, a political and cultural critic and a historical revisionist. Despite its carrier background, from the half of the 1970s until well into the 2000s Watanabe was surprisingly prolific in the *nihonjinron* field, enthusiastically propagating the establishment's ideology (Watanabe 1974a, 1977, 1980, 2000, 2007). In this respect, Watanabe's essays provide a significant insight into two aspects of Japanese contemporary society which I will discuss: the role of language as the most effective expression of ethnic identity and the existence of a widespread set of peculiar Japanese expressions (un)consciously conveying the underlying ideology. Watanabe connects the uniqueness of Japanese culture to the particularism of the language, as revealed by a number of untranslatable aesthetical concepts and native words conveying a "Japanese spirit", a vast range of lexical items and idiomatic expressions appealing directly to the emotionality of the Japanese. My purpose is to present and analyze a specific example of the ideological distinction that Watanabe intentionally develops, namely the lexical dichotomy between the stratum of the supposed "native lexicon" and that of "foreign loans". Watanabe refers to the former by means of a variety of words and expressions related to the concepts of "authenticity", "primitivity" and "naturalness", associated with attributes such "indigenous", "pure", "irrational", "emotional", "soft/maternal", "inward-looking". The latter lexicon is instead related to negative notions such "foreignness", "corruption" and "artifice", and to attributes such "alien", "contaminated", "logical", "detached", "hard/masculine", "outward-looking" (Watanabe 1974a). I will examine likewise the language of the feelings that each linguistic category is supposed to evoke: while native words should evoke a primordial ethnic memory of harmonious, peaceful, delicate and moving sensations, foreign loanwords provoke aggressive, euphoric states of mind, alien to the "true" Japanese spirit. My contribution will provide an insight into the close relationship between language and ideology. The role that language plays in the definition of Japanese national identity may help understand the importance of language in vehiculating and slyly imposing ideology, power, identity paradigms and distorted realities to the minds of social actors.

This is all the more actual in the contemporary world, where the spread of nationalisms and ethnic conflicts is sustained by a scattered usage of rhetoric and ideological narratives.