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Russian Language in Japan

Petr E. Podalko*

1. Introduction

Although modern Russia is not as big and powerful, both politically and economically, as her official predecessor, the late Soviet Union (in which Russian kept the status of state language), the Russian language is still widely spoken not only inside the territory of the Russian Federation and its former “imperial” parts — now independent states in Europe and Central Asia, such as Belarus, Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and so on, but also on the international stage in all parts of the world. Russian is the eighth most spoken language in the world by the number of native speakers and the sixth by the total number of speakers (2019). It belongs to the so-called Slavic group of the Indo-European family of languages, being one of the three East Slavic languages (with Ukrainian and Belorussian as two others). Nowadays it has the status of state language in the Russian Federation as well as one of the two state languages in Belarus; the official language in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, and a non-official but very widely spoken (according to political reasons, it is often called a “second language”, or “verbal tool of communication” in some countries) not only throughout many parts of Eastern Europe (including the three Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania), but also in the Caucasus region (Republics of Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan), in Central Asia, and such places distant from mainland Russia as Israel and Mongolia (the latter of which also shares with Russia the same Cyrillic alphabet), where it is often used in an official capacity as well as in public and private life.

* Professor, School of International Politics, Economics & Communication, Aoyama Gakuin University

Russian is the largest native language in Europe (including non-Slavic nations) and the most widespread language, both geographically and ethnically, on the Eurasian continent. It has about 146.6 million speakers in Russia alone, and a total of around 215 million native speakers around the world (2019). Also, Russian is the second most widespread language on the Internet after only English.

Russian has been one of the six official languages of the United Nations' procedure from its very start in 1945. Also, due to some new political and economic trends, a certain level of the Russian language ability had become urgently needed even in such places as parts of the Eastern Mediterranean that had never belonged to the so-called “socialist camp”, like Egypt and Turkey. The same curiosity comes to mind when we start thinking about the Russian language and Japan.

2. Historical Background and Sociolinguistic Situation of Russian

What makes Russian so special? Perhaps it is the language itself — arguably the most difficult — in terms of mastering — representative of the whole “Slavic family”, which includes 12 members, because of its complicated grammar, and at the same time — extremely flexible and softness in word order, that helps one to change the whole meaning of a phrase by only re-arranging the turn of nouns and verbs. Another difference comes from the historical overview of Russian linguistic culture. The Russians were probably the only nation among the so-called “super-power states” that avoided cultural dependence from any foreign language. Since Prince Vladimir brought Christianity to then “Kievan Russia”, or Kievskaya Rus', in the late 10th century, making the Cyrillic alphabet the first script system to be introduced to his people, Russians have never used any other tongue to express themselves to each other. Contrary to Western Europeans, whose culture was dominated by the Latin influence for centuries, or the states of the Islamic world who are still dependent on the Arabic language at least several times a day for praying, Russians kept speaking, writing and reading their native language without pause, persistently improving its style, exploring new methods of expression, enriching its vocabulary, that finally generating

the great masterpieces of Leo Tolstoy, Fedor Dostoevsky and Anton Chekhov, the three writers that so greatly influenced world literature and contributed to the formation of the humanitarian criteria of the modern world. Interestingly, the oldest Russian texts in existence today are still readable not only by scholars but also by common people as well. These were written in the 11th century — the time when the English language was not yet fully formed and thus not widely spoken in England, and Italian or Spanish did not even exist as independent tongues.

Among other interesting facts about the Russian language outside of Russia are these: 1) In the USA, Russian is one the 15 most popular languages spoken; 2) in 2010, about three million American citizens admitted that they were of Russian ancestry, and about one million Americans named Russian as their native language; 3) recently, Russian was added to the list of official languages of New York State, where 218,000 people are Russian speakers, according to official statistics. Back to Russia, nowadays there are more than 80 languages spoken by the different minorities living in the Russian Federation, who use the Cyrillic alphabet as the basic letter system for their own alphabets, and more than 60 of these have also periodicals and common literature published in those alphabets. The total number of nations and nationalities in modern Russia exceed 190 (2010).

3. The Russian Community in Japan

The Russian language was probably heard on Japanese soil for the first time sometime in the early 1770s, when sailors or castaways fleeing from Siberian exile occasionally reached Japanese shores in search of fresh water, food and rest. Also, Japanese shipwreck victims, or “hyor-yumin”, who were regularly saved by Russians in the 18–19th centuries (the most famous of them, skipper Daikokuya Kodayu, returned to Japan in 1793), also brought back to their homeland a certain ability in Russian as well as some books and other handmade or printed materials written in the Cyrillic alphabet. Later, the first official envoy from Imperial Russia to Japan, Chamberlain Nikolai P. Rezanov, who came to Nagasaki in 1805 to sign a trade treaty, wrote a Russo-Japanese diction-

ary and a phrase-book that became the first ever real introduction to the language and grammar of this relatively unknown country, made by a Westerner, while staying in Japan in collaboration with native speakers of Japanese.

Although Rezanov's diplomatic mission actually failed — probably, because it was too early then for a Western culture to penetrate into Japanese traditional life — Russia still managed to become the second country (right after the USA) to establish official relations with Japan by signing the so-called Shimoda Treaty in 1855. Russia could even have been the first to do so, if only she had behaved more aggressively. Her envoy, this time Vice-Admiral Evfimi V. Putyatin, arrived in Nagasaki earlier than Commodore Mathew C. Perry came to Edo Bay. But while the Russians were gently asking about trade during their negotiations with the Edo authorities, the Americans strongly insisted, if not demanded, to establish official bilateral relations instead — and finally won this prize, concluding the Kanagawa Treaty in 1854.

The first Russian Consulate in Japan was opened in Hakodate in 1858; later, in the 1870s, the Tokyo Mission (upgraded to Embassy status in 1908) was established. Since then, for almost half of a century, the number of Russian subjects who lived in Japan rarely exceeded 100 people — for instance, in 1912, there were only 102 Russians living in Japan, including diplomats and members of their families. However, the Revolution of October (1917) followed by the Civil War (1918–1922) in Russia changed this: a lot of so-called “White Russians” or Russian Emigres who fled the Bolshevik regime came to Japan seeking safety. Most of them stayed here as workers or peddler-merchants: one foreign author mentioned in his book, that “a figure of a Russian emigrant with a big pack of goods on his back has become an imminent part of the Japanese landscape in 1930s”. According to Japanese sources, the number of Russian residents in Japan before the two world wars sometimes exceeded a few thousand people. After 1945, many emigrants feared the possibility of extradition to the USSR, so they tried to leave Japan, moving to the USA, South America or Australia, with only a few of them staying behind. From the mid-fifties, being “Russian” in Japan mostly meant

also having Soviet citizenship.

In 1985, the first year of “perestroika”, there were only 322 Soviet citizens who lived in Japan with non-tourist visas; ten years later this figure increased almost ten times, and in 2004 the number of Russian citizens in Japan reached 7,000 people, while the total number of Russian tourists coming to the country exceeded 43,000. The first “Russian Club” in Tokyo was opened in 1993; now there are a few such clubs and many circles attracting people with different interests and various ages and statuses among their members.

In mid-1990s, the Russian language even played the role of “lingua franca” in many places on the Western Coast of Japan, especially in the Hokuriku region facing the Sea of Japan, and in Hokkaido, where a lot of small local firms were then trading with their opposites from Primorsky Krai of the Russian Far East and Sakhalin, selling second-hand cars in bulk, after the Russian government abolished the old restrictions on international trade activities. It was not strange or unnatural in those years after “perestroika” to see a Pakistani or Iraqi resident worker from a small company in Toyama or Niigata Prefecture fluently speaking in plain Russian, serving as an interpreter between his Japanese boss and Russian businessmen who came from Vladivostok or Nakhodka, and even the Kamchatka Peninsula, on a two to three-day short trip to buy himself an old “Nissan” or “Toyota”, sometimes in poor shape but still capable of running.

Nowadays, according to official resources, the number of Russian citizens who live and work in Japan on a long-term or permanent basis, reached 8,306 in 2016. This put Russians in third place among all Europeans, immediately after British and French residents registered here. Russians inhabit all 47 prefectures of Japan, including remote Okinawa, with more than one-third of them being concentrated in the Kanto region, mostly in Tokyo, Kanagawa, Saitama, Chiba and Ibaraki. But if we add here the representatives of the fifteen former Soviet Socialist Republics, now independent states, such as Belarus, Ukraine, Uzbekistan and others, who still communicate in Russian, especially in private life, these figures would become even more impressive: for example,

there were 1,699 Ukrainians and 1,503 Uzbeks in Japan in 2016 (the latter two groups are the most populous among those from former Soviet republics in present-day Japan).

4. Russian Education in Japan

Teaching Russian in Japan is conducted in two main areas: Russian language as a specialty and Russian language as a second foreign language. Russian as a specialty is taught in such universities as Hokkaido State, Sapporo University, Sophia University (aka Jochi University), Waseda University, Tokyo University, Soka University, Kyoto Sangyo University, Osaka University, Kobe Linguistic University and Kanto International High School (Kanto Kokusai Koto Gakko). Also, Niigata Prefectural University and Tenri University (Nara Prefecture) give their students the option to study Russian at the same level as if it was their subject of specialization.

In addition, Russian is taught in many other Japanese universities, both public and private, where it is included in the group of the most popular six so-called “Second Foreign Languages” (others are French, Spanish, German, Chinese and Korean). Some special educational facilities, like the Tokyo Institute of Russian Language (opened in 1949 as a special Russian Language Teaching Center run by then Association of Friendship between Japan and the USSR, aka “Nisso Kyokai”), also taught courses in the Russian language and culture, emphasizing the long history of Russo-Japanese relations in the cultural sphere. Of course, international politics as well as the economic situation in neighboring countries often influence the educational process, and that is probably one of the main reasons why the number of facilities where Russian is taught in Japan has decreased in recent years.

One of the biggest and yet still unsolved tasks for those who teach foreign languages in modern-day Japan is how to attract young people to study anything except English, especially when English-related topics and subjects surround us in everyday life in Japan, and the government propaganda that officially supports English as the only real tool of communication in international society is very effective indeed. To address

this problem, the Japanese Society to Research Problems in Teaching Russian (Rokyoken) was established in 2000. Nowadays it consists of about 100 permanent members who represent almost all the large universities, with a few local branches in the Kansai, Hokuriku and other regions of Japan. It operates an official website (rokyoken.web.fc2.com), and since 2010, the Society also started to issue its own annual scientific journal called *Roshiyago Kyoiku Kenkyu* (“Researching Problems of Teaching Russian”, see: rokyoken.web.fc2.com/journal.html), including a paper version.

Another solid yet unusual method to gain some ability in Russian with a good portion of general knowledge about Russian history and culture is to visit a church. As of 2014 there were a total of sixty-eight Orthodox churches, widely dispersed through all the territory of Japan, and some of them provide regular classes in Russian for beginners, also giving lectures on occasion about Russian cultural traditions, history and so on, like the famous “Nikolai-do” (“Church of St. Nikolas”) in Surugadai, Tokyo—the first official Orthodox church in Japan, built in 1891.

The total number of Japanese universities where Russian is taught at different levels is given below in Table 1.

Year	State	Municipal	Private	Total	Universities in Japan
2002	54	22	113	189	679
2005	53	21	110	184	697
2007	50	19	100	169	710
2009	46	22	97	165	723
2012	44	17	88	149	735
2014	44	19	84	147	738

The total number of Japanese high schools where Russian is taught on different levels is given below in Table 2.

Year	Municipal	Private	Total
2003	15	6	21
2005	20	5	25
2007	19	4	23
2009	17	4	21
2012	18	5	23
2014	23	4	27

It is well-known that the Japanese government is very sensitive to foreign propaganda on Japanese soil, including in the important sphere of education. Therefore, the number of the so-called “international schools” is not large: most of them are operated on a bilateral basis and provide their courses to the children of foreign citizens who live and work in Japan, with the assumption that those pupils will leave Japan sooner or later. This is the main reason for which their curricula are always based on foreign standards, mostly American or British, with all main subjects taught in English (there are also few schools with German, French or Italian as their main languages — less than ten in total), and their ultimate goal to prepare pupils for future study in the USA or another English-speaking countries. But still there are some exemptions, and among them two are related to Russia. The first one is The Russian Embassy School that is situated on the Russian Embassy premises and therefore is not supervised by Japanese authorities. The school was opened for the first time in the mid-1970s as a place where the children of then Soviet diplomats in Japan could study basic subjects for a while without separating them from their parents. At that time, it was teaching only small kids at the elementary level. In 1985, the very year when Mikhail Gorbachev’s “perestroika” began in the USSR, the school was named after Richard Sorge, the outstanding German antifascist, who

worked in Japan in 1930–40s as a journalist and also served as an intelligence analyst for the Soviet Union. In that same year, the Embassy School was upgraded to the junior-high level, and later — to the full curriculum of compulsory education based on Russian national standards of eleven years in total, including high school (in 1992). Nowadays, the school is run by both the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Foreign Affairs; all the teachers are professionals with three-year contracts per one term. To be qualified as a pupil, a child must fulfil one of three criteria: to have Russian citizenship, to belong to an international family with one Russian parent, or to be able to study in the Russian language (for foreign nationals). The education is provided on a full-time everyday basis, and also there are two types of distance learning classes: once per week (also known as partial distance learning), and once per semester (full distance learning) that in practice means special test sessions for those children, who live mostly outside the Kanto region. In the academic year of 2018–2019, there were 331 pupils in total, representing six countries: Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Mongolia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Among the pupils, 143 were taking the full-time regular course, 98 were taking the partial distance learning course, and 90 were taking the full distance learning course, including students who live in such remote places as Okinawa and Hokkaido¹⁾.

Another program is the famous Hakodate Filial of the Far East Federal University (FEFU) of Vladivostok, that opened in Hakodate, Hokkaido, in 1994. This is a very unique case, because here the Japanese side not only gave its full agreement to open a branch of foreign university, but also recognizes all qualifications that the students get during their studies. After finishing the program, the graduates obtain not only a baccalaureate degree, but also can apply for a job in both countries on equal terms.

The subjects are taught in two languages, Russian and Japanese, but almost all the students are Japanese nationals, with a small portion of

1) All figures related to the Embassy School were obtained by the author from private contacts with the Embassy staff and an interview with the school principal on May 6th, 2019.

Chinese and others.

The fact that such a facility was opened in Hakodate, not somewhere else, is very symbolic: the first Russian Consulate in Japan was established there in 1858, and nowadays Russians form one of the most populous foreign diaspora in Hakodate. All the street signs in the center of Hakodate are written in four languages, including Russian, making it very easy for tourists, as they feel partly like they are at home. Russians are also among the most regular guests in Hakodate as well as in the whole of Hokkaido, so the same style of marking the streets and other places recently appeared in the city of Wakkanai in the north, in Nemuro (eastern peninsula) and in other places on the island.

5. Other Linguistic and Cultural Issues

When it comes to studying, many people from different countries, and among them a lot of Japanese, people often say how difficult it is to catch the unusual sounds of a foreign language, and what a big problem it is to distinguish by ear the difference between B and V, L and R and so on. But Russians almost never have such problems. The attempt to explain this phenomena was made several years ago by Kuniko Murase in her book *Saikyo-no gaikokugo gakushu:ho.*, published by Nihon Jitsugyo Shuppansha in 1996. It is well known that each language has its own scale of sound wave frequency that is measured in Hertz. A special project was done to compare the frequency of those sonic waves in six different languages. The results were published in a sort of comparative table. So, according to those results, the Japanese language sounds fell between 125 and 1500 Hertz, American English 1000~4000, British English 2000~12000, the German 125~3000, the Italian 2000~4000, and Russian was shown to have the widest scale of sound frequency: 125~12000 Hertz. This finding explains why Russians are generally so fast in studying foreign languages (of course, being fast does not mean having right pronunciation however!): the so-called “inner ear” helps Russians pick up new sounds relatively quickly, and this is also beneficial for those who study Russian as a second language relatively early — after getting used to its very special phonetics, one can start learning

something else and it will definitely progress faster than it could be without that previous experience of Russian.

Besides schools, universities or other educational facilities, people in Japan are also able to study Russian via TV or radio courses in Russian. NHK, the public broadcasting company in Japan, gives various opportunities for those who are interested in the language of Pyotr Tschaikovskii and Yuri Gagarin. Its daily television and radio programs contribute much to this educational process, also issuing special printed materials and inviting guest speakers with various backgrounds.

The students mentioned above and other people, who study Russian in Japan and want to try their ability in a competitive forum, may take part in the Annual Russian Speech Contest in mid-June. The Contest is mainly organized by Eurasia Society (former Nisso Kyokai), and it takes place at the Tokyo Institute of Russian Language in Kyodo, Tokyo Metropolitan Area. This tradition first began in November 1971. The 45th Competition was held in June 2016, including 25 people from different parts of Japan. The Tokyo Institute of Russian Language also has a library with a rich collection of more than 150,000 pieces of literature and other published materials related to Russia, CIS and the USSR. This is the only such library of its kind in Japan.

There are two types of Russian Language Qualification Exams in Japan — one is organized by the Tokyo Institute of Russian language twice a year (mostly in May and October) and is divided into four different levels, starting from beginner. Another qualification exam was introduced for the first time in 1999 in Hakodate, at the premises of the Hakodate Filial of Far East Federal University, but it was later moved to Tokyo and now is patronized by the Japan Cultural Association (Taibunkyo). This examination is held only once a year, mostly in August, and the program is divided into six different levels. Both types of examination issue their own certificates to those who pass all the necessary parts, although the latter one is based on the Russian Federation State Standard (ТРКИ), and therefore its certificates are often considered by many people to be more “international” and more widely accepted outside of Japan.

One more interesting phenomenon is so-called bilingual children, or children born in international marriages in Japan. According to both Russian and Japanese resources, the number of female citizens of Russia and other former Soviet republics living in Japan in the beginning of 21st century is almost four times bigger than the figures describing their male compatriots. Many of these women are married, have children, with most of their partners hailing from other nations, mostly Japan. Therefore, a lot of children from such marriages have dual citizenship, and their education has recently become a significant problem not only for them, but for the whole community. Accordingly, the summer seminar of the Japanese Society to Research Problems in Teaching Russian (Rokyoken) in 2012 for the first time was fully devoted to the problem of Russo-Japanese bilingual education, and since then such seminars are organized annually, mostly on the premises of Tokyo University of Foreign Languages (also known as Tokyo Gaidai).

Russia has always been one of the most closely situated neighbors of Japan and her people, so a certain ability in the Russian language as well as a significant portion of knowledge about Russia's history and culture are obviously in permanent demand in Japan to help preserve friendship and good relations between the two nations, as was true in the past and will continue to be in the future.

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