

***Yasashii Nihongo* (Plain Japanese): Its essence and possibilities**

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1. Introduction: Two meanings of *Yasashii*

I will introduce *Yasashii Nihongo* in my presentation. First, let me show you that *Yasashii* has two meanings: one is “easy” or “plain” and the other is “gentle” or “kind”. Both meanings are contained in the concept of *Yasashii Nihongo*.

2. The birth of *Yasashii Nihongo*

It was after the Great Hanshin-Awaji earthquake when the term *Yasashii Nihongo* was used for the first time. Many foreign residents of the area who had little command of Japanese or English suffered during the reconstruction process from a lack of information. In other words, they endured two forms of damage from the earthquake. Some linguists started to study, based on lessons learned from this earthquake, how to inform such foreign residents in the event of a disaster using simplified Japanese; this form of Japanese was termed *Yasashii Nihongo*.

Research into *Yasashii Nihongo* is expanding and includes Japanese-language education for foreign-rooted and deaf children. Studies have also been initiated on how *Yasashii Nihongo* or “plain Japanese” affects *Futsuu no Nihongo* or “normal Japanese”.

3. Provision of information for foreigners

When considering the provision of information for foreigners, differences in their status, i.e., short-term residents (including tourists) or long-term residents, should be taken into consideration.

For the latter, as focused on in this presentation, English cannot play the role of a common language, as research shows that many long-term residents feel that they have poor English language skills and that Japanese is a better choice for communication (Cf. Iwata 2010), and many native Japanese speakers feel similarly. Therefore, English cannot be used as the common language.

It is apparently also true that “normal” Japanese, which native Japanese speak or write, cannot become the common language without making adjustments for non-natives. Therefore, information should be provided for long-term residents in

Yasashii Nihongo, or Japanese adjusted for foreigners.

4. *Yasashii Nihongo* as a common language in a local community

Yasashii Nihongo has two major objectives. One, “*Yasashii Nihongo* for *ibasho*”, is a form of linguistic support so that long-term residents can feel that Japan is an “*ibasho*”; a place they belong to. The other goal, “*Yasashii Nihongo* as a bypass”, aims to provide linguistic support for foreign-rooted children so that they can acquire enough linguistic ability in Japanese to compete with their Japanese rivals and to independently achieve their career goals at the end of their high school education.

In the former objective, the most important function of *Yasashii Nihongo* is as a common language for a local community. The increase in long-term residents means that many foreigners come to live in a local community, which requires a common language between Japanese and foreign residents.

English is not suited for it, as the above discussion shows. The “normal” Japanese language, lacking in adjustments from native residents to non-natives, is also not a good candidate. Therefore, the only candidate for a common language is *Yasashii Nihongo*, or Japanese with adjustments from native residents to non-natives. A model where *Yasashii Nihongo* becomes a common language is the following:

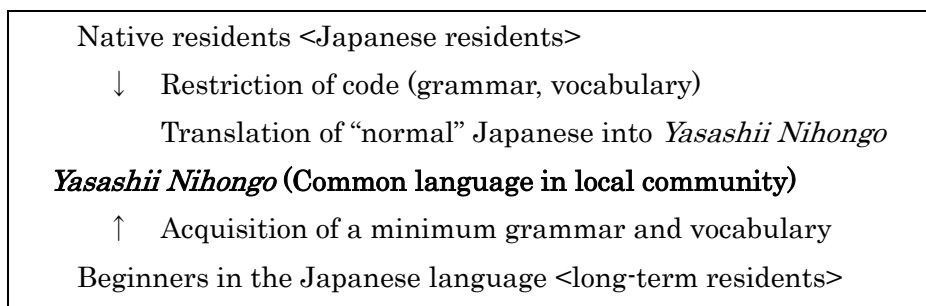


Figure 1. A common language in the local community and *Yasashii Nihongo*.

Note, however, that whether Figure 1 will be realized or not depends crucially on the mindset of Japanese residents.

5. Collaboration with Yokohama City

We are working with Yokohama City, the second biggest city in Japan, to simplify its official documents and make them more accessible to foreign residents. One of the outcomes will be to decide how administrative terminology is translated into *Yasashii Nihongo* and to publish this translation list on a Yokohama City webpage.

6. Where is *Yasashii Nihongo* heading? : How to build Japan in the next 30 years

I will briefly explain the key concept of *Yasashii Nihongo*.

The population of Japan has been decreasing in number and it is predicted that the working-age population (ages 15–64) will decrease by about 30 million by 2050, or in 30 years. It seems that the decision by the Japanese government in April of this year to loosen the restrictions for obtaining an “unskilled work” visa aims to compensate for the decrease of this population with an increase in foreign workers. However, I believe it impossible to resolve the problems Japan will face in the near future through this method of accepting foreigners.

Such a way of acceptance will increase the number of unskilled workers and may satisfy their needs. It will be, however, impossible to resolve the more essential problems Japan will face because this method will not create a permanent tax-paying foundation, which means this will not contribute to the resolution of the financial problems both central and local governments face. Additionally, such time-limited acceptance will not allow for the succession of skills in small factories, which will seriously damage Japanese manufacturers and the Japanese economy.

It is indispensable, in my opinion, in order to resolve those problems fundamentally, to accept foreigners as equal partners with whom we Japanese will build Japan in the next 30 years and to decide all policies regarding the acceptance of foreigners, including ones concerning Japanese language teaching, based on the idea of an equal partnership.

7. Conclusion: What is needed for *Yasashii Nihongo*

To conclude, let me describe what is needed for *Yasashii Nihongo*.

As we saw above, *Yasashii Nihongo* demands the translation of “normal” Japanese into *Yasashii Nihongo* from native speakers of Japanese, and it is the technical aspects of this translation that tend to be the focus.

However, what is more important is a mindset of wanting to understand the information foreigners wish to convey and the ability to make what one wants to inform foreigners of understood. One would speak slowly and loudly when talking to an elderly person who is hard of hearing, and would also naturally translate “normal” Japanese into a “plain” version when talking to a child. Why would someone change their Japanese? It is likely because they want to talk with the other person. This shows us that having a “mind” to have an interest in foreigners is much more important than technique. If someone wants to talk with a foreigner, they will change their way of speaking, and this change will occur in a natural manner. Thus, what is needed for

Yasashii Nihongo is a mindset to want to talk with or to know about foreigners.

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- Facebook page <https://www.facebook.com/yasashiinews/>
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