The Role of Local Language for Foreign Workers in Regional Japan: A Qualitative Study of Language Regard by Indian Caregivers

Christopher Hennessy (University of Fukui)

Background

More foreign workers are locating to smaller regional areas instead of larger cities due to recent population trends; this foreign worker influx is increasing year on year, including Fukui Prefecture, in which there are over 16,000 foreign residents (Fukui Prefecture, 2023). However, foreign residents moving to regional areas often face the task of dealing with a regional dialect not taught in traditional Japanese courses. Related to this, the Japanese government is calling for newcomer foreign workers to be "foreigners as ordinary citizens" in order to make a smooth transition into Japanese society and workplaces. Against this background, I – as a foreign resident of Fukui Prefecture – have conducted and published research using a variety of perceptual dialectology research tools with local foreign and native residents to assess perceptions of the local dialect (Cramer, 2016). Studying dialect perceptions is important because there is necessity to understand nonspecialists' views on language if researchers are to intervene successfully in language policy and education (Preston, 1999: p. xxiv).

Recently, I have focused my research efforts on Indian care workers in Katsuyama City, which is a small city in Fukui Prefecture with a population of around 22,000 people (Katsuyama City 2022). Specifically, I have pursued the following research questions with these foreign care workers using qualitative research methods:

1. What perceptions do foreign care workers in regional areas of Japan hold towards local dialect used in the workplace?
2. What do foreign care workers living in regional areas of Japan think about their own use of the local dialect?
3. In what ways are foreign care workers in regional areas of Japan affected by the different uses of Japanese language at the workplace?

For the purposes of this paper, I will explain my research method, Grounded Theory Approach, and discuss some of the important *focused codes* developed in the analysis of interview data collected from these Indian foreign care workers.

Literature Review

In reviewing a number of collected research volumes on perceptual dialectology, there is a dearth of resources for research studies that are conducted purely with a qualitative research approach. Main research journals and collections on dialectology in general may only briefly highlight perceptual dialectology research, for example Kibe (2013) with a Japan nationwide dialect perception study or Mitsui (2016) looking at the Tokyo dialect.

There are studies that exist that use qualitative data, primarily interviews, to conduct

qualitative research in perceptual dialectology. Mann (2016) interviewed eight self-proclaimed gay men in focus groups in order to determine if gay men, which can have their own variety of speaking, in southern United States (which has its own regional dialect) can maintain an accent that reveals their southern roots as well as their gender identity. In a very different area, but still qualitative research in nature, Takeuchi (2023) conducted research on non-Japanese assistant language teachers in Ehime Prefecture to determine if second language speakers of Japanese can gain more legitimacy as participants in society through their comprehension and use of dialect and gendered language.

Research Method & Informants' Background

This research was conducted using a Grounded Theory Approach (GTA). GTA, as described by Charmaz (2014) is a "rigorous method of conducting research in which researchers construct conceptual frameworks or theories through building inductive theoretical analyses from data" (p. 343). It employs a variety of different analysis techniques, such as *coding*, and requires a back-and-forth approach to data, which means that new data is constantly compared to old data to validate analysis. This is often referred to as the *constant comparison method* (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Analysis usually begins with *initial coding*, which is done by breaking apart the data into small segments and analyzing each segment individually, then compare against other *initial codes*. Similar *initial codes* are grouped together to create *focused codes*, which are related to other *focused codes* in order to achieve *theoretical concepts*, which in turn are interconnected in order to generate *theory*. *Theory* itself in GTA is described as an organized set of *concepts* that are designed to rationally and clearly explain a certain phenomenon (Charmaz, 2014).

I conducted this research using in-depth semi-structured interviews with eight informants. The informants were all female and from India, and aged from late twenties to early thirties. They all arrived in Katsuyama City around the same time, either in June 2022 or July 2022. The interview guide used was developed to gain the "lived experience" of the informant as described by Seidman (2013: pp. 17-18). The content of the interview guide developed for this research study includes a number of different types of questions, including linguistic-related questions, questions on interactions, views on social hierarchy at the workplace, and experiential questions. I went outside the realm of pure sociolinguistics-related questions to get the full social experience of each informant's time in Katsuyama City in order to ultimately lead the informant to reflect more deeply on the language they use and the language used around them.

Discussion of Generated *Focused Codes*

Using this semi-structured interview process along with a GTA analysis on the interview data, I was able to develop over 1,000 discrete *initial codes*, and from those *initial codes* develop a set of nine different *focused codes* briefly described below.

In (1) Language Learning & Acquisition, language is a recurring theme in all informant responses. From formal acquisition of the Japanese language in a Japanese language school in India before coming to Japan to learning local dialects and the role of different linguistic supports once they arrived in Katsuyama City, language is an essential part of the experience – and challenge – of being a care worker in rural Japan.

In (2) Cultural & Social Integration, informants describe both challenges and successes in navigating a new cultural environment, and how social integration plays a pivotal role. It represents a fundamental domain that includes various elements related to how care workers communicate, interact, and build relationships with different stakeholders.

In (3) Workplace Dynamics & Communication, the informants mentioned circumstances in which the workplace communication or dynamics could be positive or negative. They highlighted specifically communication/dynamics with Japanese coworkers, communication/dynamics with *riyosha*, communication in the workplace and local dialect, and finally logistical aspects of the workplace.

In (4) Support Networks & Relationships, the informants mentioned circumstances in which they used relationships with different people to create a network of contacts so they could receive assistance, encouragement, and emotional support., especially during difficult times – i.e. a support network. Specific aspects of the overarching support network described by the informants includes a coworker support network, a fellow Indian support network, a contracting organization support network, and a local community support network.

In (5) Coping Mechanisms & Resilience, the informants mentioned different strategies or behaviors that they use to manage or deal with stress, difficult emotions, or challenging situations. Coping mechanisms help individuals to navigate and adapt to their environment, and to maintain psychological well-being. Resilience refers to the ability of an individual to adapt to, recover from, or withstand adverse events, challenges, or stress. There are various forms that this *focused code* takes, including language use, technology, establishing certain mindsets, trips, home cuisine, and even various forms of escapism.

In (6) Motivations & Expectations, the informants mentioned circumstances about their motivations and expectations in Japan, which affected their overall outlook on life in Japan. The elements highlighted specifically related to language learning, working environment, future in Japan, money issues, and troubles in daily life.

In (7) Cultural & Linguistic Challenges, the informants mentioned circumstances in which they had difficulties either linguistically or culturally from life in a regional part of Japan. Specific challenges mentioned by the informants include the following linguistic elements: the local dialect, speaking with *riyousha* or their family members, technical work language, and the dissonance between the Japanese language they were taught and the Japanese language that was spoken in Katsuyama City. Culturally, there were also a number of challenges, including differentiating private self from professional self and outsider/insider status in a small Japanese community.

In (8) Identity & Affiliation, the informants mentioned circumstances in which they define themselves through the interview data in terms of identity or affiliation. Identity refers to the way individuals perceive and express themselves, and how they believe others see them. It encompasses a range of factors, such as personal beliefs, values, personality traits, physical characteristics, cultural background, profession, and roles in various social contexts. Affiliation refers to the act of associating or aligning oneself with a particular group, idea, or organization. This can be based on shared beliefs, interests, goals, or characteristics. They specifically highlighted aspects of identities/affiliations as nurses, as

members of the local community, as workers, as Japanese language speakers, and as Indians.

In (9) Adaptive Strategies and Growth, the informants mentioned circumstances in which they adapted successfully to their surroundings and grow as individuals. Adaptive Strategies include concepts such as flexibility in adjusting plans and actions based on the changing environment or new information, learning by continuously gathering information, reflecting on experiences (both successes and failures), and using that knowledge to inform future decisions. Some of the mentioned aspects of adaptive strategies and growth included language learning strategies, acceptance of the culture, and having awareness of what you want.

Conclusion

I have identified an initial nine *focused codes* that help define the "lived experience" for Indian care workers in a regional area of Japan. These *focused codes* help to define and therefore understand the experience of these foreign care workers, but ultimately, in Grounded Theory, there is a need to connect these *codes* to develop an overall *theory* which can help explain how these *codes* interact with each other. My next step is to develop these *focused codes* into a relationship, with an ultimate goal of developing a *theory* to describe the linguistic, cultural, and professional adaptation necessary in an international workplace for foreign care workers in rural Japan. With this knowledge, I hope to contribute to the Japanese language education community for better preparing and training foreign workers in Japan.

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