

HSI Report: Sociolinguistics – Language and Wellbeing

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Organized by Hokkaido University’s Graduate School of International Media, Communication, and Tourism Studies, the “Sociolinguistics – Language and Wellbeing” course was held over 4 successive days, from August 2 to 5, 2021. As a part of Hokkaido Summer Institute (HSI) 2021, the course was originally designed for an on-site learning experience, but due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic it was transformed to a full online session. Thus, participants from all over the world were still able to participate.



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At the heart of the course was the importance of language and how it affects society. Dr. Patrick Heinrich from the University of Ca' Foscari University of Venice (Italy), who has been actively involved in sociolinguistics research for more than 20 years, was the main facilitator. The course was also joined by the organizer lecturers from Hokkaido University: Associate Professor Ruriko Otomo and Professor Jeffrey Joseph Gayman. Despite the time differences, the discussions held among the participants were very lively and insightful.

“The challenge is the time difference. It was tough and tiring,” said Dr. Heinrich, who throughout the entire course had been 7 hours behind Japan, where most of the participants were. “But that was something to which we have all become accustomed. I enjoyed talking to all the participants. It is not an exaggeration to say that this year’s class was the most pleasant class that I have taught in the last 20 years.”

The participants ranged in age, linguistic and academic background, which was perfect for a discussion on sociolinguistics. Participants shared their thoughts based on their unique experience, feeding each other new perspectives. Such as through one assignment, in which the students introduced and analysed the linguistic landscapes around the students’ place of residence, every participant was able to take a glance at other cultures.



Two Okinawan language revitalizations in Naha City, Okinawa Island. Okinawan teacher training session in 2006 (left) and playful language learning in an Okinawan language nest in 2016 (right). (Photo: Patrick Heinrich)

To explore more sociolinguistics landscapes, Dr. Heinrich also invited the discussants to investigate the language-related issues in Japan. Most of Dr. Heinrich's research has been scrutinizing the endangered languages in Japan, most notably the language variants of Ainu and Ryukyu. Discussions always entailed different facets of human well-being, from identity, to solidarity, and even environment.

Due to the nature of the online course, the fieldwork had to be substituted. In lieu of a visit to the National Ainu Museum in Hokkaido, the course organizers invited Dr. Mika Fukazawa from the museum. Professor Yumiko Ohara from the University of Hawaii was also invited as an external speaker. Both guest speakers are experts in the area of language-culture interactions.

“Inviting two other speakers from outside the university is something that had not been done before in our HSI course. Had it not been online, we probably would not have had this degree of guest discussant variety,” explained Professor Gayman.

Wenting Li, a first year Master's Student of Hokkaido University's Graduate School of Education, took part in the course. She was delighted to have taken part in the discussions as it would help progress her ongoing research on the Yi language in China.

“I am glad that I took this course, which was recommended by my academic supervisor. I attained new knowledge about the language varieties in Japan. The Yi language, which is used in the Southwestern part of China, also has a high variety. With this, I hope I can observe parallelisms between the two languages,” said Li.



The course participants at the final session, including Dr. Heinrich (top left) and Professor Gayman (second row, left)

The Sociolinguistics course has been offered in HSI multiple times, creating a meeting — and networking — opportunity for people sharing similar interests in the subject. This year’s course, albeit in a different form, still offered the same opportunities.

“I admire the HSI program and the international make-up of the classes. I now have long-standing and excellent relations with colleagues at Hokkaido University. From the week we spent together, I learned new things from the fellow lecturers and the students,” commented Dr. Heinrich.

To receive information about HSI 2022, please sign up for a reminder [here](#).

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