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## AATJ's Role in Diversity and Inclusion: An Opportunity to Transform into a Well-Integrated Organization

Suwako Watanabe

### 1. Introduction

According to the survey results, 57% of the survey respondents said no to the question, “Is the Japanese language educator community in North America diverse one?” (Mori, Hasegawa, Park, and Suzuki, this volume). This result suggests that the American Association of Teachers of Japanese (AATJ) as a professional organization needs to improve diversity within the field. What is a more important question is whether or not our organization and its membership as a whole embrace the value of diversity and put it into practice in every aspect of their profession on a daily basis. The survey results make it clear there is disparity and division among our members according to varying language background and instructional levels. Now that we have the results and can see the kinds of issues being raised, we need to reflect on these issues and try to understand how they arose. Based on my experience of having served three national organizations (ATJ, NCJLT, and AATJ) as an officer and on the boards of directors, I will first elaborate on these issues and point out that AATJ has missed the opportunity to integrate the two organizations, the Association of Teacher of Japanese (ATJ) and the National Council of Japanese Language Teachers (NCJLT) after they merged. In order to improve the current situation, I suggest that AATJ transform into a full organization of well-integrated members by (1) reevaluating the current mission and bylaws in order to have a common goal or vision adopting the spirit of diversity and inclusion as a core value, (2) strengthening its commitment to fostering a climate conducive to open and respectful exchange of ideas, and (3) articulating what it aims to instill in students.



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## **2. Issues of Disparity and Divisions in Japanese Language Education**

### **2.1 History and Context: Consolidation without Integration**

Before their merger in 2012, the Association of Teachers of Japanese (ATJ) and the National Council of Japanese Language Teachers (NCJLT) had been in existence with separate systems of governance. According to the AATJ's website ([www.aatj.org](http://www.aatj.org)), ATJ was founded in 1963, and the membership was mainly comprised of college level scholars and instructors from academic units such as "Far Eastern Languages" and "[Department] of Chinese and Japanese" (Association of Teachers of Japanese 1963). In the editorial notes in the ATJ's inaugural publication of its journal, Viglielmo (1963:2) states, "the publication stimulates ... discussion of the many problems concerning Japanese language teaching," thus it is inferred that initially the ATJ's primary concerns were specifically related to Japanese language teaching. Two decades later, in the wake of Japan's economic success in the 1970s, many K-12 schools started to offer Japanese, which resulted in a rapid increase in numbers of both learners and instructors of Japanese at the K-12 level in the United States (Miura 1990:29). According to the Modern Language Association's (MLA) census data, there were 2,718 learners of Japanese in 1963, which increased to 11,516 in 1980 (MLA census data). Remembering how NCJLT was formed, Kazuo Tsuda, one of the founding directors, recounts that the National Foreign Language Center in Washington D.C., ATJ, and the Japan Foundation language center "organized the first conference for Japanese secondary teacher" where Hiroshi Miyaji, then president of ATJ asked Tsuda to create an organization for secondary teachers in 1991 (National Council of Japanese Language Teachers 2011). In the following year, 1992, K-12 Japanese instructors founded the National Council of Secondary Teachers of Japanese (NCSTJ), which later changed its name to National Council of Japanese Language Teachers (NCJLT). Subsequently, the burst of Japan's economic bubble resulted in diminished funding resources to support non-profit organizations. In 1999, in order to articulate the two national organizations as well as streamline administrative work especially for financial transaction, a third organization, the Alliance of Associations of Teachers of Japanese, was formed. This three-some infrastructure was maintained for a while although there were some challenges such as scheduling a date for a joint board meeting for approximately twenty officers and directors. In 2008, concerned members of our profession and other stakeholders proposed to

ATJ and NCJLT the idea of merging both organizations with the stated reasons that decreasing resources could be utilized in more effective ways such as cutting back costs for board meetings from two organizations to one, and also trying to simplify office administration.<sup>1</sup> With a little over a year of research on feasibility by a task force, the governing bodies of ATJ and NCJLT voted on the merger. A transition team was formed to solve many issues such as different membership fees, governance structures, integration of the NCJLT's local affiliate associations, and viable ways to host two conferences annually, one with the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) and the other with the Association for Asian Studies (AAS). After many discussions and deliberations by the task force, ATJ and NCJLT merged to become the current AATJ in 2012.

Although the issues related to organizational structure and governance were solved, AATJ as an organization has not quite acted in unity, instead working like a patchwork of different subgroups usually divided by factors like instructional level (K-12 and college), language background (L1 and L2), and disciplinary training. Since the merger in 2012, AATJ has offered a variety of programs and activities to serve the needs of both K-12 and college levels, expanding the Nengajo Contest and JNHS (Japanese National Honor Society) programs to the college level. However, it has fallen behind when it comes to nurturing a climate where various subgroups are encouraged to openly exchange ideas. We need more collaborative work across borders of instructional levels, language backgrounds, and disciplinary fields under a common vision in order to advance the field of Japanese studies.

## **2.2 Divisions Between Levels and Language Backgrounds**

The division between K-12 and college levels within the field of Japanese language education seems to have remained unsolved since the merger in 2012. Some of the comments by K-12 instructors in the survey (Mori et al., this volume) mention lack of articulation because of the divide between K-12 and college levels. The division is clearly reflected in the participation groups of AATJ's two conferences: many K-12 instructors attend the fall conference affiliated with ACTFL while most of the attendees at the spring conference affiliated with AAS are college level instructors.

While articulation across the levels (including between programs) are usually concerned with issues of pedagogical approach and

administrative/operational structure, the predominance of L1 instructors at the college level may have contributed to distorted nature of the articulation issue in the Japanese language education field. According to the survey (Mori et al., this volume), whereas the percentages of L1 and L2 Japanese teachers at K-12 levels are 57.9% and 41.3% respectively, the percentages at the college level are 83% and 13.2%. The predominance of L1 Japanese teachers at the college level is striking. And the highest number of respondents (39.2%) chose “ethnic/cultural background” as the aspect lacking diversity, which is followed by the answer of “gender and sexuality” (24.2%). One respondent commented, “The divide between the secondary and tertiary education contributes to a damaging tacit belief that non-native speakers will never be able to achieve a particularly high level of proficiency.” This comment indicates a perception that the college level is equated to the L1 group.

The predominance of Japanese native-speaking teachers at one level poses two issues that L1 Japanese teachers must acknowledge and critically examine. One is a deeply held belief that Japanese is a difficult language, so a non-native speaker cannot master it fully. And the other is the danger of becoming insensitive to multiculturalism. In describing issues in a K-16 articulation project in Colorado in late 1990s, Saegusa (1999:34–35) makes the following point, “Many native-speaking teachers and other native speakers of Japanese are stuck on the notion that a teacher must speak Japanese perfectly in order to teach it. As a consequence, some do not believe that a non-native speaker can be trained to become a Japanese teacher.” The same point is indirectly reflected in the survey results on native-speakerism. A high percentage (61.9%) of L2 Japanese teachers strongly agreed with the statement: “Being a native speaker is not an important characteristic of a good Japanese teacher,” while L1 Japanese teachers’ agreement was split between “Strongly Agree” and “Agree,” with 34.1% and 34.9% respectively (Mori et al., this volume). The question of why many of the L1 respondents did not choose “Strongly Agree” remains unknown; however, as pointed out by Saegusa (1999), it is possible that many L1 Japanese teachers hold on to the belief that native-speakerhood is an essential element of a good Japanese teacher.

The second issue is that working in a circle predominated by L1 Japanese teachers runs the risk of getting too dependent on their own language and culture out of convenience, and thereby losing sight of how L2 Japanese teachers feel marginalized. According to the episode introduced as Excerpt 5 in Mori et al., (this volume), an L2 Japanese

teacher participated in an email correspondence group among L1 Japanese teachers in Japanese but gradually withdrew from the group, with the difficulty of the formal Japanese writing style being mentioned as a possible cause for the L2 instructor's withdrawal. The episode prompts us to examine the degree of multicultural sensitivity that L1 Japanese teachers exercise. Whether intentionally or unintentionally, L1 Japanese teachers' group may create invisible barriers that are difficult to break for L2 Japanese teachers who then, as a result, may feel marginalized. Furthermore, what is decisively damaging is that L1 Japanese teachers subconsciously impart a notion of superiority of native-speakerhood to students. Currently, there seems to be the lack of a climate that promotes an honest, respectful, and constructive exchange of different views and perspectives between the L1 and L2 groups and the K-12 and college levels.<sup>2</sup> Regardless of the language and cultural background, any professional is expected to know how to build a working environment that is multiculturally sensitive and inclusive.

### **2.3 Division Between Language and Content at College Level**

Although division between language and content at the college level may not be within the scope of the survey, this issue is relevant to AATJ as its mission and bylaws include Japanese language, literature, linguistics, and pedagogy as disciplinary fields it serves. The language-content divide is closely related to the bifurcated structure in a program pointed out in the MLA report (2007). The bifurcation issue may not be as profound in liberal arts colleges and small programs headed by a few faculty members, but it seems to be an on-going challenge for the field of foreign/second language education in general. Lomicka and Lord (2018:119), delving into the impact of the MLA's 2007 report after ten years, concluded "We still face the need to transform both the structure of our departments and the offerings of our programs." At institutions where the language-content structure is in place, positions for language instructors tend to be non-tenure line and are more vulnerable in a budget crisis, while those for other content areas such as literature, linguistics, history, anthropology, and religion tend to be more secure with a tenure-line status. Sometimes a language instructor needs to teach more hours or accept more students than they could reasonably manage and may be pressured to compromise the integrity of their instruction. These unequal conditions for language instructors can be construed as a reflection of the undervaluing of language teaching and reinforces a hierarchical relationship between language and content areas.

The language-content divide in our field can also be detected in the fragmented ways of participation in the AATJ's activities and governance. At the AATJ spring conference, there are not many opportunities during the conference where members from different disciplinary fields are encouraged to network and engage in intellectually stimulating discussion that lead to collaborative scholarship. Such an opportunity does take place as an AATJ sponsored session during the AAS conference after the AATJ's spring conference is over, but most members in the language education field are gone by then. Moreover, there seems to be a preconception that AAS is for content areas such as political science, history, literature, anthropology, and religion, and there is little space for language education. In terms of the representation in the AATJ's governance, a disproportionate representation can be observed. According to the list of Officers and Directors of AATJ between 2012 and 2019 obtained from the AATJ Office, only two out of twenty-six individuals are from the literature field. I am not criticizing any particular field here, but the seemingly disproportionate representation calls for examination to see if the current representation serves the members' needs properly or it is indicative of problems, such as an unhealthy divide among disciplinary fields.

### **3. Suggestions for Future Actions: What Should AATJ Do?**

As mentioned in 2.1, when the merger of the two organizations took place, we missed the opportunity to develop a common goal that enables members with different backgrounds to work together as a cohesive organization. In order to close the gaps between subgroups of level, language background, and discipline, and to become a well-integrated organization, AATJ needs to reevaluate the current mission and bylaws, find a common ground among subgroups, and set up a vision under which members can collaborate to advance the field toward the shared vision. According to Mcmillan's dictionary, vision is "someone's idea or hope of how something should be done, or how it will be in the future" (Mcmillan). A review of the AATJ's current mission (quoted below) and its bylaws reveals that they lack a vision in terms of (1) what impact the organization wishes to have on society (local, national, and global communities), and (2) what it envisions its students to attain through the study of Japanese. In addition, it lacks a core value that requires the organization to foster a climate for open exchanges and productive collaboration among members throughout the field.

### 3.1 A Vision, a Common Ground

The following is the mission statement from the AATJ's website.

The American Association of Teachers of Japanese is a non-profit, non-political organization of individuals and institutions seeking to promote the study of Japanese language, linguistics, literature, culture, and pedagogy, at all levels of instruction. AATJ fosters professional development, the promotion of Japanese and foreign language education, and the exchange of research, and seeks to coordinate its activities with related organizations to promote Japanese studies, including a network of state and regional affiliate organizations. ... (American Association of Teachers of Japanese *Mission Statement*)

The purposes of the organization, excerpted from its bylaws, are as follows:

- a. To promote and encourage cooperation and exchange among scholars, teachers, and students of Japanese language, linguistics, and literature, and others engaged in those activities, and to promote academic work and foster research and study in those fields and to broaden and deepen knowledge of Japan and its culture.
- b. To promote the exchange of ideas, information, and experience relevant to the concerns of its members through meetings, educational seminars, publications, correspondence, and other such activities.
- c. To encourage the development and dissemination of superior methods of teaching Japanese language, linguistics, and literature, and to aid in the attainment of increased teaching expertise, broad competence, intellectual depth, and overall professional excellent.
- d. To be engaged with regional, national, and international developments in the fields mentioned above and related areas. (American Association of Teachers of Japanese Bylaws)

As for the purpose statement (a), the scope of Japanese studies is inward-looking, and it does not include how Japanese studies are concerned with the world outside of Japanese studies. In other words, it does not articulate what significance Japanese studies should bring about to members of the surrounding communities. Other professional organizations articulate how they hope to impact the surrounding world. For example, ACTFL views its role as being “uniquely positioned to help bridge the ideological gaps that divide our nation,” and describes its vision of the world to be a place where “diversity and intercultural competence



are qualities that must be embraced” (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages 2016). The American Association of Applied Linguistics’ (AAAL) vision can be identified in its mission statement, which says that the “mission of AAAL is to facilitate the advancement and dissemination of knowledge and understanding regarding language-related issues in order to improve the lives of individuals and conditions in society” (American Association of Applied Linguistics, emphasis by the author). As members of AATJ, we should ask ourselves what impact our scholarly and educational endeavors should have on the United States as well as the global society. We need to find a common ground to construct a new vision.

One driving force for AATJ to become more cohesive under a shared vision might be the current tendency toward weakening of humanities studies. AATJ should encourage members from various disciplinary fields as well as different levels to work together to make Japanese studies sustainable in US education while keeping its wide accessibility. Recently liberal arts studies are getting weaker due to the strong emphasis on STEM, and it is necessary to reaffirm the value of the humanities disciplines as well as that of language study. Language study prepares undergraduate students to become scholars in other area studies in future or professionals who utilize their linguistic and cultural competence in various sectors.

### **3.2 Diversity and Inclusion as a Core Value to Foster a Collegial Climate**

The purpose statement (a) above states that AATJ encourages cooperation among scholars, teachers, and students, but it does not mention cooperation between levels, institutions, nor among various subgroups. As the survey results show more cases of division than collaboration, systematic collaboration has not been happening across levels, disciplines, and linguistic backgrounds except for some activities such as AP Japanese. AATJ should create a culture where diverse professional backgrounds of members are viewed as strengths that will enable Japanese studies to be sustainable for a long time with no individual member feeling marginalized or inferior because of their attributes such as rank, discipline, or language background.

To promote collaboration within the AATJ, the organization needs to facilitate fora where members of diverse backgrounds are able to exchange information and ideas openly and respectfully on an equal footing. Such a climate can be realized by adopting diversity and inclusion as a core value. Other professional organizations such as AAS and AAAL, recognize the

value of diversity. AAAL views diversity as “an asset within our community and a source of learning and opportunity” (American Association of Applied Linguistics 2013). AAS recognizes diversity as something that “strengthens the community by harnessing a variety of skills, perspectives, talents, and resources to meet new challenges” (Association for Asian Studies).

In the purpose statement (b), AATJ is to promote exchange of information relevant to “the concerns of its members.” The concerns should include not only scholarly concerns within individual member’s disciplinary field (such as second language acquisition, grammar, and medieval literature) but also issues covering various aspects of professionalism, such as inequity in a work setting and hiring practice as well as an overall climate within the professional field. It is also important to ensure equitable representation in the organizational governance.

Currently AATJ provides various activities and programs such as professional development, the Nengajo Contest, the Japanese National Exam, advocacy, conferences, JNHS, and Special Interest Groups (SIG). The executive officers and each director should examine each activity to see if there are any aspects where diversity is neglected. They should also be proactive in finding ways to promote diversity and inclusion. For example, a workshop on how to incorporate the value of diversity and inclusion in existing curriculum may be offered as an AATJ professional development program. Directors should critically evaluate if any programs inadvertently exclude any students or teachers. When advocating for Japanese studies, we often highlight uniqueness about Japanese language and culture, but we need to make sure that the appeal of uniqueness does not promote exclusiveness and elitism.

### 3.3 Students

Lastly, we need to include students in our vision, i.e., what we wish to instill in our students and want them to achieve through the study of Japanese. Both ACTFL (2016) and MLA (2007) reiterate that multilingual and multicultural competence is critical for our students to be successful in the increasingly diversified global society. ACTFL issued a clear statement as to what students are expected to attain by saying that it “ensure[s] that language learners become linguistically and culturally competent to succeed in the global economy and develop the ability to interact respectfully with others both here in the U.S. and around the world.” The American Association of Teachers of French (AATF) and the

American Association of Teachers of German (AATG) also explicitly state that they aim at preparing students to attain multilingual ability and multicultural understanding (American Association of Teachers of French; American Association of Teachers of German website).

When we develop our vision for our students, diversity and inclusion are vital components. ACTFL links the value of diversity to students in the following statement. ACTFL (2019) will foster “contexts that are inclusive of diverse backgrounds and perspectives by ... drawing on its diversity to build teacher capacity, and recruiting and retaining a language teacher workforce more closely aligned with the ever-changing demographics of our student bodies” (ACTFL 2019). Our student bodies today are much more diversified in terms of their ethnic background, learning styles, motivation, and learning purpose. We have no choice but to view diversity as a source of strength and draw on it. Furthermore, diversity among instructors inspires students to become scholars or teachers of Japanese studies in the future. In order to secure a pool of future professionals as well as encourage life-long learning, we need to create a synergy among various disciplinary fields and across levels and schools.

#### **4. Conclusion**

In conclusion, I encourage professionals who are relatively new to the field of Japanese studies to take leadership in overcoming any disparity between disciplines, language backgrounds, and levels and set a new direction for our professional organization to tackle new challenges in many years to come. The issue of diversity and inclusion provides us with a welcome opportunity to generate synergies among various sub-groups within the field and strengthen the organization so that Japanese studies can thrive by becoming accessible to the greatest number and the greatest range of individuals possible.

#### **NOTES**

1. This information was obtained from the minutes of NCJLT board meeting on October 4, 2008, the joint meeting of NCJLT, ATJ, and AATJ on October 5, 2008, and NCJLT board meeting on September 25, 2010, owned by this author.
2. AP Japanese is an excellent example of providing a venue where instructors at the secondary and college levels work together every year. However, it is a program directed by the College Board.

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