The Enterprise of *Yasashii Nihongo*:
For a Sustainable Multicultural Society in Japan[1]

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1. Introduction: Japan as an upcoming multicultural society

There are about 2.1 million foreign residents in Japan, comprising 1.8 % of the Japanese population, and they are growing in number. With the country suffering the dual effects of low birth rate and high longevity, it seems incumbent on Japan to encourage immigration; however, the Japanese government has never officially adopted this position. Accordingly, the topic of how to guarantee human rights to the increasing number of foreign residents is gaining importance, in anticipation of immigrants playing a more prominent role in Japanese society in the near future.

I am leading our research group in the challenge to address this issue from a linguistic viewpoint, in which *yasashii nihongo* is a key concept.

In this paper, I will provide a detailed introduction to *yasashii nihongo*, an indispensable concept for Japan to grasp in order to become a sustainable multicultural society.

2. The origin of *yasashii nihongo*

In this section, I will briefly review the history of *yasashii nihongo* as a technical term.

2.1 The Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake and *yasashii nihongo*

Yasashii nihongo was first used as a technical term after the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake in 1995. In this disaster, 6,434 people died, more than 40,000 were wounded, and about 250,000 houses were destroyed. Many foreigners formed part of these figures. Life after the disaster was very hard for those foreigners who had little command of English or Japanese because most information was published in those two languages, thus doubling their suffering.

Some researchers, many of whom were sociolinguists, stood up and took action: they started researching how to convey necessary information in disasters to foreigners who have little command of English or Japanese. They showed that employing simplified Japanese in media communications is feasible and useful: they called the construct *yasashii nihongo*. It was in their research that *yasashii nihongo* was used as a technical term for the first time[2].

2.2 From "in disasters" to "in daily life": *Yasashii nihongo* in the context of our research

It goes without saying that *yasashii nihongo* can serve as a useful means to convey indispensable information in times of disaster. However, information related to daily life is equally indispensable, and foreigners must be able to access this information in order to live comfortably in Japan. Therefore, the aim of our research is to examine "*yasashii nihongo*" in the context of daily life.

2.3 The multiple meanings of *yasashii* in Japanese

In the paper so far, In Japanese, "yasashii" has multiple meanings: "easy," as shown in (1), and "kind", "gentle", or "soft", as shown in (2)

and （3）[3].

(1) *Kono tesuto wa yasashii.*
This   test TOP[4] easy
This test is easy.

(2) *Kare wa josei ni yasashii.*
He TOP women to kind
He is kind to women.

(3) *Kanojo wa yasashii koe de hanasu.*
She TOP soft voice in speak
She speaks in a soft voice.

This poor one-to-one equivalence is why I have decided to retain the Japanese *yasashii nihongo* instead of providing an English translation, which would inevitably limit its meaning.

3. The aims of *yasashii nihongo*（1）: Provision of official information to foreign residents

In this and the next few sections, I will discuss some topics central to *yasashii nihongo*. I start with the topic of the provision of official information to foreign residents, which our research has investigated intensively.

3.1 The three aspects comprising *yasashii nihongo*

As mentioned above, our research on *yasashii nihongo* was prompted by the question of how to provide foreign residents with essential information for daily life in Japan. As our investigation progressed, the following three aspects were found to be important roles servable by *yasashii nihongo*: compensatory education, common language in local communities, and grammatical syllabus for Japanese language teaching in local

communities.

3.2   *Yasashii nihongo* as a means of compensatory education

The idea of compensatory education was first used by Yamada 2002 to insist that Japan should officially guarantee its foreign residents a chance to learn Japanese to compensate for being unable to use their mother tongue in Japan because of the multicultural immaturity of Japanese society. When the official guarantee of elementary Japanese language education, which has long been the desire of people in this field, is realized, *yasashii nihongo* should guide the design of elementary Japanese language courses offered by national/local governments.

3.3   *Yasashii nihongo* as a common language in local communities

There are three candidates for the common language between Japanese residents and foreign residents: English, "standard"[5] Japanese, and *yasashii nihongo*.

English is a poor candidate because, for the majority of foreign residents living in Japan, English is less accessible than Japanese (Iwata, 2010). How about "standard" Japanese, perhaps with some adjustments made when conversing with foreigners to enable better mutual understanding? In fact, this is the default candidate amongst native Japanese: it has been taken for granted that any foreigner who wants to join local Japanese communities should master a native-like level of Japanese[6]. However, the imbalanced relationship this fosters between the two groups of residents is by no means desirable, and so this approach should be abandoned.

Therefore, the last and logical candidate is *yasashii nihongo* because it

could provide an ideal model of a common language for local communities, as depicted in Figure 1.

Nevertheless, this does not imply that *yasashii nihongo* will *automatically* become the common language, only that it *could* become the common language. Whether it will become the common language or not depends entirely on our constant endeavors.
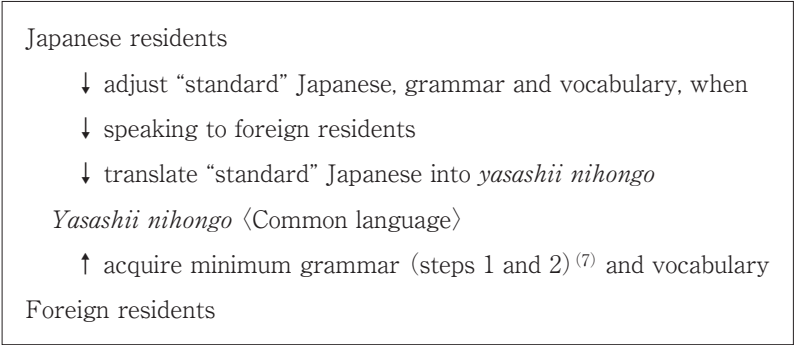
Japanese residents

    ↓ adjust "standard" Japanese, grammar and vocabulary, when

    ↓ speaking to foreign residents

    ↓ translate "standard" Japanese into *yasashii nihongo*

  Yasashii nihongo ⟨Common language⟩

    ↑ acquire minimum grammar (steps 1 and 2) [7] and vocabulary

Foreign residents

Figure 1. Ideal local community with *yasashii nihongo*

3. 4　*Yasashii nihongo* as a basis for grammatical syllabi for Japanese language teaching in local communities

Japanese language teaching is sometimes classified into two types: the school type and the local type (cf. Ozaki 2004). The school type is Japanese language teaching conducted in universities and Japanese language schools, while the local type is that taught in local Japanese classrooms, mostly conducted at public halls in local communities. The two types are quite different from each other in character, most notably in the time spent in each lesson. Typically, local-type lessons are conducted for 2 hours per week, while standard school-type basic-level lessons are for 20 hours per week.

This apparent difference strongly suggests that the two types should

be managed differently and that different syllabi and materials should be used. Bearing this in mind, we created a new grammatical syllabus and materials. For details and theoretical implications of the syllabus, see Iori 2015a.

3.5 *Yasashii nihongo* classrooms as safe places for foreign residents

Although education is essential to the local Japanese classrooms, the most important role of the classrooms is not the education it provides. The most important role of the classroom is actually as a safe place, or *ibasho* in Japanese, for foreign residents, who face many stressful situations when living in a foreign country, where they cannot use their mother tongue or visit places freely, and often feel unsupported.

3.6 Rewriting official documents and *yasashii nihongo*

As an example of realizing the three abovementioned essentials of *yasashii nihongo*, our research group has been studying how to write official documents so that foreign residents who have a basic command of Japanese can understand them.

We have intensively investigated methods of rewriting official documents and found several points which should be considered in rewriting, some of which are discussed below.

3.6.1 Necessities for rewriting

The most important points to consider in rewriting official documents are to retain necessary information and boldly cut any unnecessary information[8]. The results of our research into these points can be found in Iori et al.（eds.）2013.

3. 6. 2 "News Web Easy" by NHK

Next, I would like to introduce readers to "News Web Easy"[9], a website managed by NHK (*Nihon Housou Kyoukai*: Japan Broadcasting Association), which started in 2012. Each day, five news items originally broadcast on the TV NHK news are published in an easy Japanese (literally "*yasashii nihongo*") style[10].

This website has many benefits for Japanese language teaching, in local communities in Japan and abroad, because it enables teachers and students to access authorized rewritten texts of daily TV news articles, which had been very difficult to access before the service started.

3. 6. 3 Collaboration with municipalities

One historical and groundbreaking accomplishment of our research is our collaboration with a municipality. Having successfully conducted our study on rewriting official documents through mutual communication with Yokohama City's officials, the standards of rewriting using *yasashii nihongo* will be applied to some webpages of the city's website.

This is unprecedented because rewritten texts of official documents can be useful for foreign residents only when they have been authorized by municipalities. Without authorization, texts written in *yasashii nihongo* would lack impact and reach[11].

4. The aims of *yasashii nihongo* (2): *Yasashii nihongo* as a bypass

As discussed in Section 3, our research started from the question of how, from a linguistic perspective, to guarantee human rights to foreign residents: thus, the target of our research has been adults. However, as

our research progressed, we became aware that our objective would not be fulfilled without considering the problems of the children of these adult foreign residents. These children will need the most support if Japan is to become a sustainable multicultural society, or *tabunka kyousei shakai* in Japanese, since, in contrast to their parents, they did not choose to live and grow up in Japan.

4.1 Sustainable multicultural society and foreign-rooted children (FRCs)

Our research on the children is in its early stages and will therefore take time to see successful results. However, we are compelled to continue our research to realize a fruitful multicultural society in the near future. In this paper, the children of foreign residents are referred to as foreign-rooted children, or FRCs for short[12].

4.2 Japanese language teaching for FRCs: *Yasashii nihongo* as a bypass

Many things need to be considered when examining the problems concerning FRCs from linguistic points of view. There is, however, one thing that is incontrovertible: FRCs are destined to be disadvantaged in their acquisition of Japanese[13], and thus, their educational materials must be designed to help overcome this disadvantage.

This reality demands a method to enable FRCs to bring their Japanese language ability to the same level as their Japanese peers. I refer to such a method as a "bypass" (for Japanese language acquisition).

4. 2. 1　Requirements: Materials enabling children to matriculate high school

As mentioned above, one of the most important goals of Japanese language education with respect to FRCs is to improve their high school matriculation rate[14]. High school matriculation is almost a necessary condition to secure employment, which in turn enables a stable life.

4. 2. 2　New grammatical syllabi and paradigms for Japanese language teaching

Any proposed bypass for FRCs needs to have the following characteristics:

a. It follows consistent syllabi from the basic to advanced levels.
b. Modules are designed so that their target content items can be learned in a limited time.
c. Content items are categorized and introduced differently according to whether its production or recognition is more important.
d. Materials for e-learning, which supplement classroom interactions, are supported.

The following reasons explain why these are necessary characteristics:

（a）Consistent syllabi from the basic to advanced levels are necessary because contemporary grammatical syllabi[15] are only available for the basic level, which causes many problems[16].

（b）Courses should be designed so that learners can acquire grammatical items step by step, thus allowing them to begin using the language they have learned straight away. Problems with the present syllabi, which prevent learners from using new language items "on the spot," are discussed in Iori（2015c）.

（c）There are two types of grammatical and lexical items: production

level items and recognition level items. Students are required to under-stand and be able to use production level items, while they are required only to understand recognition level items (Table 1). The differences in function between the four language skills in Table 1 need to be consid-ered when developing any grammatical syllabus, especially for FRCs.

Table 1. The four skills and their levels

		Media	
		Sound	Character
Level	Recognition	Hearing	Reading
	Production	Speaking	Writing

(d) E-learning is a novel medium for Japanese language teaching materials. Although most current materials are paper-based, the time has come to boldly introduce computer-based materials into Japanese language teaching. E-learning systems are more effective for children than for adults. However, the effectiveness of computer-based materials must be estimated with consideration for what should be taught in the classroom and what should be learned outside of it[17].

4.3 Japanese language teaching for deaf children

Yasashii nihongo is not only necessary as a bypass for FRCs, but also for deaf children learning the Japanese language. For deaf children whose parents are native Japanese and whose L1 is Japanese sign lan-guage, written Japanese[18] is considered a second language in the same way English is. This fact is, unfortunately, not widely appreciated, so deaf children are furnished with few chances to learn written Japanese as an L2 in the same way adult foreign learners are.

5.　A sustainable multicultural society and *yasashii nihongo*

In this section, I will consider the relationship between a sustainable multicultural society and *yasashii nihongo*.

5.1　Necessities for a sustainable multicultural society

First, I would like to discuss some necessities for a sustainable multicultural society. The most basic requirement is that foreign residents should never be regarded as a "regulating valve", whether for production or social life. Specifically, foreigners are treated as a regulating valve in the context of production when they are employed as needed and fired if business conditions fall into recession, as occurred after the Lehman shock; foreigners are treated as a regulating valve in the context of social life, on the other hand, when they are forced to engage in jobs which Japanese do not want to do, stigmatized as "3K" jobs[19], for low wages.

For Japan to become a sustainable multicultural society, it is inappropriate for foreigners to be regarded as convenient part-time workers. Hard workers must be guaranteed chances of success equal to those of hard-working Japanese, and *yasashii nihongo* can play important roles in the construction of such a society from a linguistic perspective.

5.2　The roles *yasashii nihongo* should play

As explained in Section 3.3, *yasashii nihongo* is the only feasible candidate for the common language in local Japanese communities. We must therefore start to promulgate *yasashii nihongo* and foster, in the minds of Japanese, the regard for foreigners as equal partners in Japanese society.

6. Conclusion: Expanding the scope of *yasashii nihongo*[20]

Having reviewed the enterprise of *yasashii nihongo*, I conclude by discussing the ever-expanding research domain surrounding it.

The most important research topic is the implications of *yasashii nihongo* for native speakers of Japanese, which can be viewed from two perspectives: (1) the adjustment abilities in contact situations differ between native and non-native speakers of Japanese (e.g., Usami 2015; Yanagida 2015a, 2015b) and (2) *yasashii nihongo*, which has more marked properties[21] than "standard" Japanese, can function as a mirror for their use of Japanese (Iori, 2015d).

Although the study of *yasashii nihongo* has only a relatively short history, its scope is far-reaching and should play an important role in realizing a sustainable multicultural society in Japan in the future. Moreover, research into *yasashii nihongo* is multidisciplinary, consisting of links to linguistics, language education, and language policy, and thus bears theoretical implications and significance on sociolinguistic research overseas.

Notes
(1) This paper is an English version of Iori 2014.
(2) See Sato 2004, for example, for more detailed discussions on this type of *yasashii nihongo*. See also Iori et al. 2011 to compare our approaches to *yasashii nihongo* with those of Sato.
(3) In Japanese, one can resolve the ambiguity of *yasashii* when writing by using kanji: *yasashii* in (1) and in (2) and (3) would be written using "易"and "優", respectively.
(4) TOP: topic marker.
(5) The quoted "standard" means "without adjustment" in this paper. I use quotation marks because standard Japanese (without quotation) is the opposing concept of dialect, which is inappropriate here.

（6）Some of the problems this kind of attitude raises are discussed in Segawa 2012 and Iori 2013b.

（7）I proposed two syllabi in Iori 2015b, 2015c, which are composed of six steps. Steps 1 and 2 correspond to the Early-basic level and the Late-basic level, respectively. The other steps are as follows: Step 3, Pre-middle; Step 4, Middle; Step 5, Early-advanced; and Step 6, Advanced.

（8）From a grammatical point of view, one of the most effective ways is to avoid passive sentences as far as possible. For other grammatical points and further discussion, see Iori 2013a and Iwata 2013.

（9）http://www3.nhk.or.jp/news/easy/

（10）For more information on "News Web Easy", see Tanaka et al. 2013.

（11）"News Web Easy" is a great achievement in this respect because every news article on the website in *yasashii nihongo* is authorized by NHK. This authorization is analogous to our relationship with Yokohama City, but it preceded ours.

（12）They are sometimes called JSL（Japanese as a Second Language）pupils, or JSL *jidou seito* in Japanese.

（13）It is said to take about 20,000 hours for an L1 Japanese child to acquire Japanese（Hiromi Ozeki: personal communication）. This situation may be described as a Japanese child being 50 meters ahead of his/her FRC peer in a 100-meter dash.

（14）Although there is no official data on high school matriculation rates among FRCs, it is believe to be just over 30%, while that of Japanese children exceeds 90%.

（15）For simplicity's sake, I will only discuss grammatical syllabi, and ignore vocabulary syllabi.

（16）For details, see Iori 2015b, 2015c.

（17）An up-to-date discussion on e-learning can be found in Imai 2015.

（18）For the importance of the acquisition of written Japanese for deaf children, see Oka and Iori 2015.

（19）3K refers to the initial letters of the Japanese words *kiken*（dangerous）, *kitanai*（dirty）, and *kitsui*（hard）.

（20）For more details on this section, see Iori 2015d.

（21）For more details on the distinction between marked and unmarked properties, and some of their implications, see Iori 2003, 2012, 2015a, among others.

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