

**Language as a basis for area studies:  
The multilingual program at the Faculty of Foreign Studies,  
Sophia University (Japan)**

Paper based on the roundtable: New opportunities and challenges in international Area Studies (chair: Goro Christoph Kimura), IX World Congress of ICCEES (International Council for Central and East European Studies), Kanda University of International Studies (August 6, 2015).

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In my paper we first confirm the role of language skills for area studies. Then, we present an example of recent developments to integrate language proficiencies in a university program for area studies. The starting premise is that in a time when trends go towards a narrow focus on English language proficiency in higher education, it is the responsibility of programs aimed at area studies to offer alternatives that integrate also the language of the studied area properly in the program.

1. Language as a basis for area studies
2. Integrating language proficiencies in area studies: the example of the Faculty of Foreign Studies at Sophia University, Tokyo
3. The Integrated Study Abroad system at the Department of German Studies
4. Concluding remarks

**1. Language as a basis for area studies**

In 2015 a film named “Persona Non Grata” was shown in Japanese cinemas. It was a film about Sugihara Chiune (1900-1986), a Japanese diplomat, who saved about 6000 lives of refuging Jews from Poland and Lithuania by issuing as vice-consul in Kaunas 1939-1940 on his own decision transit visas to Japan. He is the only Japanese among those honored as Righteous Among Nations by Israel.

The film, directed by Cellin Gluck, was filmed mainly in Poland with Japanese and Polish actors, among others Karasawa Toshiaki, Koyuki, Borys Szyk and Agnieszka Grochowska, famous stars in each countries. While generally the courageous humanistic

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper, Japanese names are given in the usual Japanese order, i.e. surname first.

act of Sugihara has been emphasized in his biographies, this film focused on his outstanding activities as a diplomat in difficult times. The film, based on recent research, shows how his contact with local collaborators such as Russian white émigré and Polish resistance helped him to get deep insights into the complex political situation. He could gather top secret facts from Germany and Soviet Union.

The background of the historical site was carefully reconstructed in the scenes so that the film could stand examination by historians. The only apparent strange and ahistorical element was that Sugihara in the film spoke only two languages: Japanese with Japanese people, and English with all others, even with little Jewish children in Lithuania, and even letters written in Russian he read aloud in English. This nebulizes the crucial precondition of all his activities: his multilingual competence. The advertisement for the film has noted that he was an “intelligence officer with excellent competence in English, Russian, German and French”. Using only English as international language may have been a pragmatic and easy solution in film making, but in fact it has the effect to enhance the erroneous assumption that English is sufficient for international contacts with everyone and enables to get profound local knowledge and information everywhere. But historical fact is, that it was his multilingual competence that enabled his outstanding intelligence activities which made him “persona non grata” both from Soviet Union and Germany. Thus, unfortunately, this otherwise excellent film aiming to show the deeds of Sugihara in a broader context ended in “painting a dragon lacking eyes” as we say in Japan when the crucial point is missing.

This kind of convenient switch to English is symptomatic for the current trend pretending to understand the world through Global English. The defect of this overreliance to English, however, was already clearly demonstrated in the events of 9/11 2001. The 9/11 commission report pointed out the lack of language knowledge as one of the key reasons why the terrorist attack could not be prevented.

“The FBI [Federal bureau of Investigation] did not have an effective intelligence collection effort. (···) It lacked sufficient translators proficient in Arabic and other key languages, resulting in a significant backlog of untranslated intercepts.” (National Commission 2004: 77)

The commission proposes to strengthen the teaching of foreign language in the US. The weak position of foreign languages other than English is not a problem only for the USA. Haberland (2011) speaks of the “paradox of internationalization” that language education other than English diminishes in the course of internationalization. This

reductionism to a single linguistic channel leads to a too simplistic view of the world. In order to decode the complex reality of the world, multilingualism is indispensable.

In such a situation where the exaggerated belief in English can become a risk factor in international understanding, the role and responsibility of area studies, based on solid proficiency in local languages while paying due attention to global contexts, is increasing. Institutional multilingualism as well as individual plurilingualism could be regarded as a basis for programs in area studies, together with the interdisciplinary approach to understand the area in a profound and holistic manner. The Center for Interdisciplinary Polish Studies at the European University Viadrina in Frankfurt an der Oder (Germany) with its multilingual and interdisciplinary digital tool “Pol-Int” gives a good example to enhance this direction.<sup>2</sup>

## **2. Integrating language proficiencies in area studies: the example of the Faculty of Foreign Studies at Sophia University, Tokyo<sup>3</sup>**

As it takes considerable time and effort to acquire a foreign language, it is important to integrate language training from the beginning of a university program on area studies. Here I will present some recent developments at my own affiliation, the Faculty of Foreign Studies, Sophia University, Tokyo.<sup>4</sup>

The Faculty of Foreign Studies, consisting of departments for English, German, French, Hispanic, Russian and Luso-Brazilian Studies, has regarded foreign language and area studies as the twin engines of its academic program. The faculty emphasizes intensive training in practical language abilities so that the students become highly proficient in the languages of their choice. Students entering the Faculty of Foreign Studies enroll in a department corresponding to the major foreign language of their choice. They begin by working to gain a command of that foreign language, along with advanced Japanese and English skills. (English majors choose a third language as a minor.)

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.zip.europa-uni.de/en/index.html>

<sup>3</sup> This section is based on the description of the Faculty (<http://dept.sophia.ac.jp/fs/en>) and the concept presentation for the “3 language & 3 perspectives” program.

<sup>4</sup> Sophia University was founded as a Jesuit institution of higher learning in 1913. Located in the center of Tokyo, approximately 12,000 students across 9 faculties pursue their academic studies under the educational principle of “Men and women for others, with others.” The Faculty of Foreign Studies was established in 1958 and has essentially contributed for Sophia to become a vital establishment in foreign language education in Japan. (<http://dept.sophia.ac.jp/fs/en/from-the-dean/>)

While building their foreign-language skills, first- and second-year students take basic area-studies courses related to their majoring language. They can also freely sample course offerings in a wide range of concentrations. This gives them an opportunity to find a research topic of special interest to them as they acquire basic knowledge of various regions of the world and learn the methodology of various disciplines.

During the following four semesters, students systematically deepen their studies in the specialty of their choice. The students make use of their language proficiencies to study topics related to their special interest, such as languages, regions, countries, multi-country blocs, or international society.

In 2012 the “3 language & 3 perspectives” program (see figure) of the faculty was selected as one of 31 faculty-specific programs in Japan for the “Project for Promotion of Global Human Resource Development” established by the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology aiming to “globalize” Japanese students. Worried about the “inward tendency” of Japanese younger generation, this project aimed to enhance Global education for students in Japanese universities and encourage studying abroad. By utilizing three languages *jointly* to speak about (for) Japan, understand regional diversity and identify global issues, the “3 language & 3 perspectives” program aims to develop multi-viewpoint competence on the basis of plurilingual competence. Note that it is not simply about speaking about Japan in Japanese, understanding regional diversity through local languages and identifying global issues with English. The crossing of the usual relations between language and area is the crucial point.

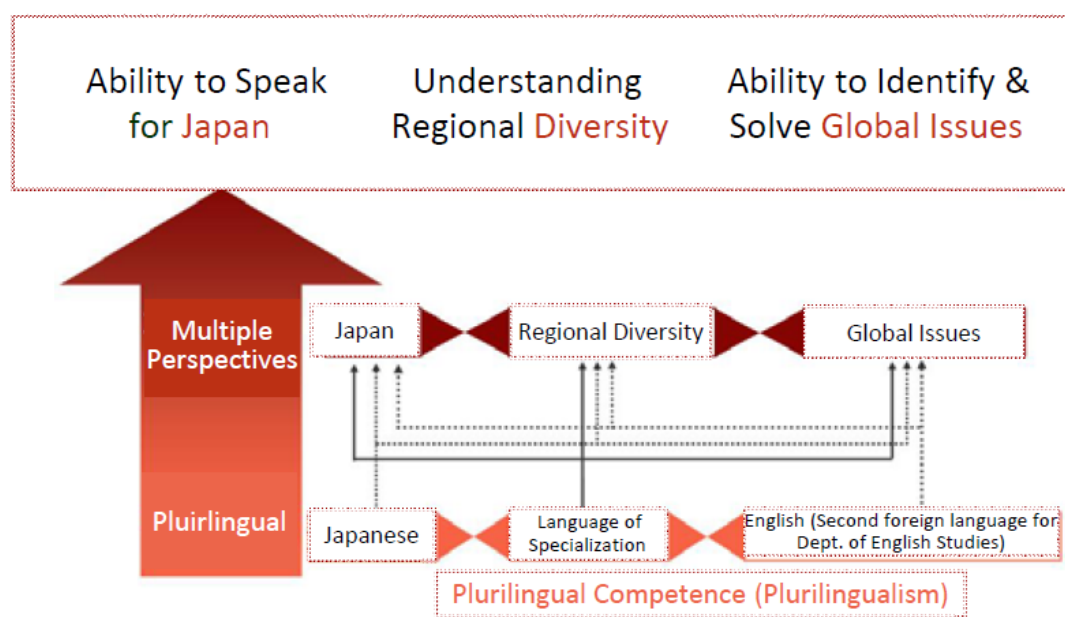


Figure: “3 language & 3 perspectives” program at the Faculty of Foreign Studies

### **3. The Integrated Study Abroad system at the Department of German Studies**

As part of the above-mentioned graduate program, the Department of German Studies introduced a new program of Integrated Study Abroad in 2015.<sup>5</sup> It seeks to give every student in the department the benefit of one to two semesters of study in a German speaking country.

In preparation for this program, from their first year through the first (spring) semester of their second year, students follow the German-language curriculum which provides six to seven 90-minute sessions of language instruction per week. First-year students also take a required area-studies course, which meets once per week each semester. In this course they build an understanding of key political, social, cultural, and historical differences between Japan and the German-speaking world, with an emphasis on Germany and Austria.

The majority of second-year students then spend the second (autumn) semester in partner universities in Germany. They can continue to stay in European partner institutions for another semester or year. After returning from a semester or more of study abroad, students are ready to attend courses of Advanced Reading Comprehension. These are classes designed to develop vocabulary and reading skills in various specialties and equip students to read and conduct research in the concentration of their choice.

Of course, it is not new that student at the German Department have the chance to study abroad. Till recently, however, within the existing Sophia University's Exchange Program student could study abroad, but exchange students from abroad were enrolled in the Faculty of Liberal Arts, where all courses are taught completely in English. Thus the Department of German Studies was purely domestic for Japanese students, while student from abroad were studying about Japan only in English.

The department's new exchange program was designed to change this situation. The department now directly accepts students from German speaking countries who learn Japanese. Students from Germany take part in Japanese language courses at the Center for Language Education and Research and take seminars at the German Department. For this purpose, seminars on Japanese-German Comparative Studies were created where Japanese and German students discuss about a broad range of topics on German speaking countries and Japan. The aim is to develop synergy through studying together and exchange different viewpoints. The languages of instruction are mainly German and

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<sup>5</sup> For detailed explanation see:

<http://dept.sophia.ac.jp/fs/international/ryugaku/zaigai/en/>

Japanese. This language use helps students to develop reading and discussing abilities in both languages in authentic contexts. In seminars there are also joint skype session with seminars on Japanese studies at partner institutions in Germany. In these sessions, Japanese students who have returned from Germany use German, and students in Germany, who experienced a year abroad in Japan use Japanese.<sup>6</sup> To promote a “culture of mutual understanding” paying due attention to the various linguistic proficiencies, we decided to encourage the practice of “simple Japanese” (*yasashii nihongo*) or “easy German” (*leichte Sprache*) where appropriate (see appendix).

Thus, after they return to Japan, Japanese students can continue interacting with German peers, and German students can try their Japanese skills non only in their daily life but also in academic context. Besides, Japanese and German students can take part in classes on Japanese, Asian, European and Global studies offered in English within the faculty and at other faculties.

#### **4. Concluding remarks**

First we have confirmed the significance of language studies for area studies and the importance of area studies in the contemporary world. Then we have had a look at developments at the Faculty of Foreign Studies at Sophia University. By extending the “3 languages & 3 perspectives” program of the faculty, the Department of German Studies shows a third way of internationalization/globalization besides “Japanese only” and “English only” programs, in order to enhance area studies on the basis of advanced plurilingual competence.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> This way of communication, called Foreign Polyglott Dialogue, is one of the modes of communication rewarding reciprocal language learning maximally (Weydt 2003). While seemingly quite uncommon, it is also used in cross-language encounters, for example in student exchange programs in Switzerland (Kimura 2011).

<sup>7</sup> For other examples of multilingual approaches in higher education see van der Walt 2013.

## Refernces

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## Appendix

### Guidelines to “Simple Japanese” for Japanese and German speakers (Department of German Studies 2017)

#### \*Introduction (Excerpt)

In “Comparative Studies Courses” offered by the Department of German Studies, Sophia students and exchange students from German-speaking countries learn many things through interacting with one another. To learn together in the same class, students need to make themselves understood, but English does not always have to be the medium of communication, for our students are in fact trying to learn either the German or Japanese language. This also applies to area studies: students are expected to read research material in German or Japanese, and furthermore, they are learning to think and discuss in these languages. The problem is that students do not always have a good command of the target language especially when they are in the process of developing its skills. The native speakers often exclude non-native speakers from their discussion.

Based on these assumptions and experiences, the department encourage students taking the “Comparative Studies Course” to use “Simple Japanese” (as well as Simple/Easy German) as a communication tool. This enables them to improve the target language and also facilitate their comprehension in a class setting. By having the students consciously use *both* languages, the department aims to increase awareness about their own as well as the others’ cultures, consequently promoting deep, mutual understanding through active discussions.

#### ©What is “Simple Japanese”?

“Simple Japanese” is a simplified, but not grammatically and pragmatically unnatural, version of the Japanese language which can be understood by a foreigner. This idea was invented after the Great Hanshin Earthquake in 1995 due to a need for foreigners to access the basic information with as much accuracy and speed as possible, so that they can take appropriate actions in times of natural disaster.

Today, “Simple Japanese” is considered as one of the communicative methods for a variety of people including foreigners, small children, elderly people and the disabled. The term “Simple Japanese” may evoke the notion that it also deals with uncomplicated themes or content. However, one of the significant roles that “Simple Japanese” plays is enabling one to explain things even when the content is difficult and complex.

“Simple Japanese” will help learners of the Japanese language to develop their linguistic ability, and this also goes for Japanese native speakers: it is crucial for them to cultivate their skills to express their own language in plain words in order to make themselves understood to those with different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. A fluent speaker is not always the best communicator in intercultural settings!