Striking differences beneath superficial similarity – easy language in Germany (*Leichte Sprache*) and Japan (*yasashii nihongo*)

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Abstract

In recent years, promoting easy/simplified language as a subtype of the "usual" standard language has increasingly become a topic of organized language management in various countries. This paper compares two different discourses: *Leichte Sprache* in Germany and *yasashii nihongo* in Japan. Despite their superficial similarity – both are promoted by issuing manuals and are increasingly visible on government websites and other public spheres – these two language varieties are situated in quite different social contexts.

In Germany, *Leichte Sprache* has emerged as a way of enhancing social participation for those who have difficulty in reading complicated texts, such as persons with learning-difficulties or cognitive impairment. Supporters of *Leichte Sprache* have worked toward legal acknowledgement of this variety and providing certification marks to approved texts.

In Japan, originally proposed as a linguistic means of disaster mitigation for inhabitants of foreign origin, *yasashii nihongo* has developed to cover also information relevant for foreigners' daily life in Japan. It has come to be positioned as part of multicultural coexistence policy (*tabunka kyosei*) in Japan.

In this paper, the LMT-framework is used to illustrate these striking differences beneath superficially similar linguistic phenomena. The different tendencies in both countries will be described as different management processes. It is argued that the German and Japanese approaches can complement each other for the benefit of both. The results suggest that focus on the management process could be applied also to other cases of such regulated varieties.

1 Introduction: aim and focus of this chapter

In recent years, promoting easy/simplified language as "modified forms of standard languages, which aim to facilitate reading and language comprehension" (Lindholm & Vanhatalo 2021: 11) has increasingly become a topic of organized language management in various countries. It is related to the Plain Language movement, but has a different focus. According to Lindholm and Vanhatalo (2021: 18):

> Whereas *Plain Language* is related to institutional documents, and aims to simplify legal language for non-professionals, the notion of *Easy Language* refers to making various texts or speech accessible to people who have difficulties reading and understanding standard language.

As intentionally created variants, easy languages can be conceived in the tradition of "designed languages" (Schubert 2001, 2017) in general, but more specifically as part of a more recent political agenda. The standard language was developed for homogeneous population in mind, but in recent years, the topic of linguistic inclusion of diverse people has become a major concern. The rapidly increasing use of easy/simplified language can be regarded as a form of

response to this challenge. In this sense, these language varieties now promoted can be called "politolects" (Antos 2017). Seemingly coming out of this same zeitgeist, the question arises whether there are differences between these variants in different countries and languages, or are these simply the same phenomena occurring in different locations?

This chapter aims to provide at least a partial answer to this question by comparing two different discourses, *Leichte Sprache* in Germany and *yasashii nihongo* in Japan. How can it be justified to compare German and Japanese? Despite the geographical distance, German and Japanese have strikingly similar sociolinguistic positions. According to statistics of speakers based on Ethnologue which includes both native speakers and people who speak the language as a second language, German is on the 12th place, followed by Japan in the 13th place among the languages of the world. In a more multicriteria "power language index" German ranks at the 7th and Japanese at the 8th place. Having developed more complex criteria, the Barometer of Languages in the World positioned German at the 4th place, and Japanese at the 6th place in 2012[1]. Both highly standardized and used in a wide range of domains, German and Japanese also share a similar degree of development and similar challenges. Providing information understandable for more people than till now has become one of the most evident challenges in Germany and Japan in recent years. In both countries, this concern has come to be included in the language policy of public bodies, local and national governments[2].

With regard to reciprocal perception of the phenomenon, so far there has been a presentation of the German concept in Japanese (Sugatani 2020) and a short mention of the Japanese concept in a German book (Janßen & Kuttner 2021: 35)[3]. Kimura (forthcoming) focuses on the different target group of both concepts. This chapter extends these considerations and compares how easy languages has been promoted from the viewpoint of management processes according to the framework of the Language Management Theory[4].

In research on language management in interlingual contact situations, such strategies as using simple expressions or speaking slowly have been analyzed as part of the repertoire of language hosts' participation strategies (Fan 2009: 102). For example, Fairbrother (2015: 65) shows how native speakers of English deliberately used simplified English when communicating with some native speakers of Japanese. In contrast to these acts of management in concrete interactions, easy languages discussed in this chapter have their origin rather on the side of organized management according to the criteria in the micro-macro continuum (Fairbrother & Kimura 2020: 19): the object of management concerns language as a system,

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[1] Britannica (source: Ethnologue) < https://www.britannica.com/topic/languages-by-total-number-of-speakers-2228881>, power language index <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/12/these-are-the-most-powerful-languages-in-the-world/>, Baromètre des langues dans le monde
 <https://www.culture.gouv.fr/Thematiques/Langue-francaise-et-langues-de-France/Agir-pour-les-langues/Innover-dans-le-domaine-des-langues-et-du-numerique/Soutenir-et-encourager-la-diversite-linguistique-dans-le-domaine-numerique/Barometre-des-langues-dans-le-monde-2022>. While Germany has retained its position in the following years, Japanese has dropped to rank 18 in the latest edition of 2022. All accessed on January 6, 2024, also in the following, if not explicitly indicated.

[2] German is widely used also in other countries, but here I limit the consideration to Germany.

[3] This mentioning is based on a lecture given by Sugatani Yasuyuki.

[4] Detailed information and an extensive bibliography can be found at http://languagemanagement.ff.cuni.cz.

the locus of management is external to discourse, the duration is trans-interactional, organizations and institutions are among the agents, the actors include specialists, communication about management is present and theorizing is explicit. Unlike foreigner talk as a register which could include deviations from the grammatical norm of the standard language, easy languages remain within the realms of the "correct" grammar.

In the following, the tendencies in both countries will be described in terms of the management processes cycle (Kimura 2020), beginning by noting and evaluation, followed by adjustment plan, its implementation and feedback/verification after implementation[5]. The last reflecting stage can lead to new management cycles. After comparing the two processes, further research perspectives on such regulated additional varieties of standard language are presented with regard to the two countries discussed here and more generally. The analysis is based on literature survey including policy and legal documents in German and Japanese.

2 Management processes of *Leichte Sprache* in Germany[6]

Noting and evaluation

In Germany, persons with cognitive impairments and their supporters were the initiators of providing information in easy-to-understand German. The inspiration came from the Easy Read movement promoted from the middle of the 1990s in the USA by the organization People First (founded in 1974). It is difficult to separate the two initial management stages of noting and evaluation. The example from the USA seems to have inspired these stages. It was noted that persons with cognitive impairments have difficulties to understand information. This was negatively evaluated as hindering these persons to participate equally in the society. The source of the problem was seen in the language.

This idea can be understood as an adoption of the social model in disability studies. According to the formerly dominant individual model, the problem lies in the ability of the individuals and the adjustment design would be to provide more education to be able to understand what is written. The Social model, in contrast, sees the problem in the society, in this case in language as a social construct. In this line of thought, it is argued that just as stairs are an obstacle for those with crutches or in a wheel chair, many texts are an obstacle for those with limited reading ability (Nickel 2014, Nelles-Rehbach 2021). So, the language has to be adjusted.

Adjustment design

The adjustment design was to provide information in a simplified language, which was called *Leichte Sprache* (literally: easy language). One of the main features of this adjustment design

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[5] The last stage was added to the management process model mainly due to its heuristic value (foregrounding post-implementation as an explicit concern) and compatibility with other policy process models (Kimura 2023).

[6] Maaß et al. (2021) provide an overview of the situation in Germany. This section owes much to the explanation there. For a general introduction, see also Bock & Pappert (2023).

is the conceptual separation of *Leichte Sprache* from the continuum of increasingly comprehensible language called *einfache Sprache* (literally: simple language) and establishing *Leichte Sprache* as a separate, standardized variety of German with its own set of rules (Aichele 2014). This stance was also adopted by researchers involved in the promotion of *Leichte Sprache*. One of the leading academic promoters declared (Maaß 2015: 166):

> *Leichte Sprache* is a variety of German. It has characteristics that can be linguistically described. So, a text can be considered precisely to be in *Leichte Sprache* when it has these characteristics.[7]

This conceptualization can be illustrated as in the following figure. Just as the usual standard language has its own rules, *Leichte Sprache* is illustrated as a variety with clear demarcation.
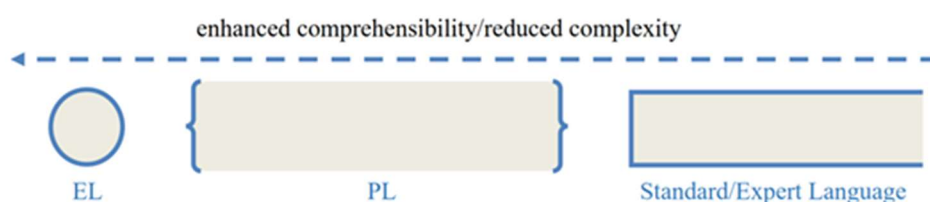

Figure 1: Easy language as a separate variety (Maaß 2020: 158)

EL=Easy Language   PL= Plain Language (*einfache Sprache*)[8]

Bock et al. (2017: 17-18) point out that this tendency of codification and standardization is a specific German development and that this can be explained by the generally strongly normative character of the German language. In order to be aware of this specific conceptualization, I will continue to use the original German term *Leichte Sprache*.

Implementation

The implementation was led by a network of people concerned with this issue. In 1997 a network of persons with learning-difficulties was created, followed in 2001 by the foundation of *Mensch zuerst – Netzwerk People First Deutschland*, a German version of the US-American organization[9]. Together with other organizations, in 2006 a *Netzwerk Leichte Sprache* (Network Easy Language) was founded, which explicitly focused on the promotion of easy language. In 2014 a *Gesellschaft für Leichte Sprache* (Society for Easy Language) was founded with the aim to "Anchoring *Leichte Sprache* as an instrument of accessibility for people with cognitive impairment in society and politics"[10].

This movement for easy language created dictionaries in *Leichte Sprache* (2000, 2008) and issued guidelines. Further, in order to approve texts as conforming to the rules and as proper

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[7] Italics are added for the English translation. Translation by the author, also in the following. Original: "Leichte Sprache ist eine Varietät des Deutschen. Sie hat linguistisch beschreibbare Eigenschaften. Darum gilt vielmehr: Ein Text ist genau dann ein Text in Leichter Sprache, wenn er diese Eigenschaften aufweist."

[8] It has to be noted that *einfache Sprache* here translated as plain language is not an equivalent to plain language as Plain English in the USA, as it is a separate, additional variety.

[9] „The part of the name "Mensch zuerst" was added in 2005.

[10] https://dg-ls.de/. First under the name „Lebenshilfe-Gesellschaft für Leichte Sprache" and in 2021 renamed as "Deutsche Gesellschaft für Leichte Sprache".

Leichte Sprache, certification marks have been developed. An important element of the certification procedure is that persons with cognitive impairments are regarded as experts to assess the adequateness of the text. Applying the motto of the disability rights movement "Nothing about us without us", the persons for whom the text should be beneficial are engaged in the checking of the texts. This inclusion of the target group in the procedure of certification can be regarded as one of the main achievements of the German development of easy language.

Another major achievement is the legal recognition as a result of lobbying. The first mention of *Leichte Sprache* in a legal document was in the renewed „Accessible Information Technology Regulation 2011 (*Barrierefreie-Informationstechnik-Verordnung*, BITV 1.0 (2002); BITV 2.0 (2011))[11]. According to this new regulation, *Leichte Sprache* should be used to explain the content and navigation of websites of administrative bodies. In 2016 a paragraph promoting *Leichte Sprache* was added in the Act on Equal Opportunities of Persons with Disabilities (*Behindertengleichstellungsgesetz* §11)[12]. According to this paragraph, people with cognitive and psychological impairments are entitled to receive clear information for some text types, "especially official notifications, general rulings, public-law contracts and printed forms in plain and comprehensible language" ("*in einfacher und verständlicher Sprache*"), and, if this does not suffice, "in Easy Language" ("*in Leichter Sprache*")[13]. Note that the "L" of *Leichte Sprache* is written in uppercase letters, meaning that it is an established notion. Since 2020 there is a federal level monitoring body about accessibility in information technology, which is also in charge of advising and checking the use of *Leichte Sprache* [14].

Today, governmental websites, on all levels from federal to communal, as well as many public institutions and organizations have a part in *Leichte Sprache,* and there were created also special websites for special topics such as coronavirus. Mass media provide also news in this variety for reading and hearing. It has become an integral part of the mediascape in Germany. Graphic 1 shows an information page on coronavirus in two varieties. As a site for persons with disabilities, this site avoids the usual markedness of the *Leichte Sprache* version in contrast to the unnamed "normal" language by naming the two varieties as being written in "difficult" and "easy" language (*Schwere Sprache, Leichte Sprache*). Without going into details, it is clear that the "difficult" version contains more information, whereas the "easy" version concentrates on essential and practical information.

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[11] http://www.gesetze-im-internet.de/bitv_2_0/BJNR184300011.html
[12] https://www.gesetze-im-internet.de/bgg/__11.html
[13] Translation into English according to Maaß and Rink (2020: 41).
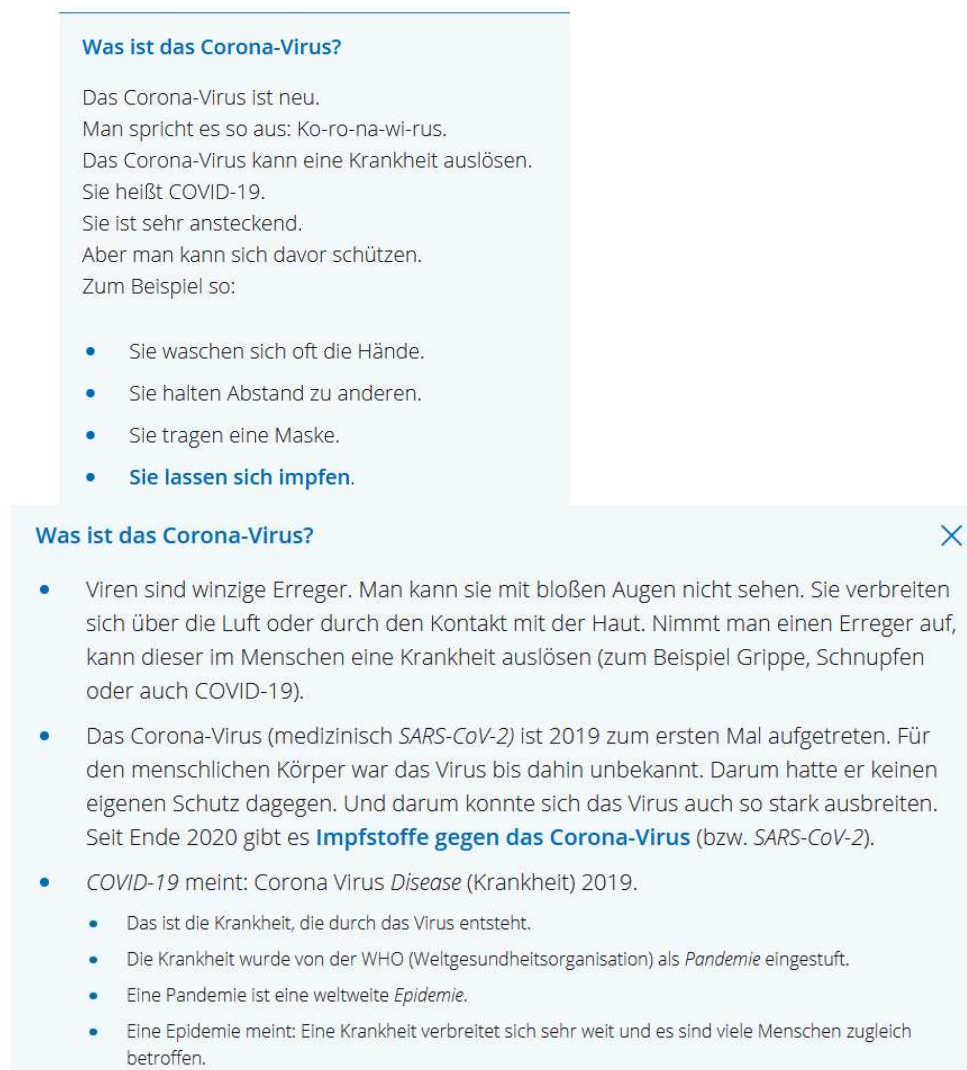[14] https://www.bfit-bund.de/DE/Home/home_node.html

Was ist das Corona-Virus?

Das Corona-Virus ist neu.
Man spricht es so aus: Ko-ro-na-wi-rus.
Das Corona-Virus kann eine Krankheit auslösen.
Sie heißt COVID-19.
Sie ist sehr ansteckend.
Aber man kann sich davor schützen.
Zum Beispiel so:

- Sie waschen sich oft die Hände.
- Sie halten Abstand zu anderen.
- Sie tragen eine Maske.
- **Sie lassen sich impfen**.

Was ist das Corona-Virus?   ✕

- Viren sind winzige Erreger. Man kann sie mit bloßen Augen nicht sehen. Sie verbreiten sich über die Luft oder durch den Kontakt mit der Haut. Nimmt man einen Erreger auf, kann dieser im Menschen eine Krankheit auslösen (zum Beispiel Grippe, Schnupfen oder auch COVID-19).
- Das Corona-Virus (medizinisch *SARS-CoV-2)* ist 2019 zum ersten Mal aufgetreten. Für den menschlichen Körper war das Virus bis dahin unbekannt. Darum hatte er keinen eigenen Schutz dagegen. Und darum konnte sich das Virus auch so stark ausbreiten. Seit Ende 2020 gibt es **Impfstoffe gegen das Corona-Virus** (bzw. *SARS-CoV-2*).
- *COVID-19* meint: Corona Virus *Disease* (Krankheit) 2019.
    - Das ist die Krankheit, die durch das Virus entsteht.
    - Die Krankheit wurde von der WHO (Weltgesundheitsorganisation) als *Pandemie* eingestuft.
    - Eine Pandemie ist eine weltweite *Epidemie*.
    - Eine Epidemie meint: Eine Krankheit verbreitet sich sehr weit und es sind viele Menschen zugleich betroffen.

Figure 2: "What is coronavirus?" in two varieties[15]

Review/verification and toward a new management cycle

After these practical and political progresses, there can be observed an intensive reflection and verification in the discourse on *Leichte Sprache* in Germany about its effectiveness. An issue repeatedly addressed is the problem of acceptability. The rules proposed for *Leichte Sprache* make texts in this variety quite different from the usual standard German. Already the visual design with bigger letters (in printed versions) and short sentences each in a separate line distinguish texts in *Leichte Sprache*. These texts can be perceived as strange or odd. As Maaß (Maaß 2020: 41) states: "The German strategy to maximally enhance perceptibility of Easy Language texts also maximally enhances stigma."

A second basic question is related to the usefulness of the rules themselves. According to the head of the above-mentioned monitoring body on accessibility, clear rules guarantee that words

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[15] https://www.lebenshilfe.de/informieren/familie/empfehlungen-zu-covid-19-corona-virus/corona-ueberblick-leichte-sprache/, https://www.lebenshilfe.de/informieren/familie/empfehlungen-zu-covid-19-corona-virus#allgemeine-informationen-zum-corona-virus. Accessed on 28.2.2023.

and sentences are easy to grasp and accessible (Wahl 2021: 13). An introduction of *Leichte Sprache* to the general public even asserts that the strength of this concept comes from its uncompromising stance which opens the door for a wider readership (Lüthen 2019: 23).

On the other hand, some linguists express doubt about the assumption that codified rules will automatically generate text that are easy to understand (Bock 2018: 15). Schuppener et al. (2019: 219) argue that basically the adequateness of texts in *Leichte Sprache* depends on the context[16]. Those critical to solutions standardizing *Leichte Sprache* plead to focus more on the different needs of various target groups rather than on general linguistic and typographical rules in a one fits all fashion (Bock et al. 2017: 17-18). Kleinschmidt and Pohl (2017) prefer the concept of "adaptive linguistic behavior" rather than rule-based *Leichte Sprache*. Not going so far, Bock (2019: 28) as well as Schuppener et al. (2019: 218) propose to deal with rules more flexibly, not as strict norms but as frameworks for orientation. According to this perception, *Leichte Sprache* would be no more a distinct variety, but an umbrella term for language use intended and functioning to promote inclusive communication.

These post-implementation evaluations have led to several new management cycles by those promoting *Leichte Sprache*. A proposal based on the noting that *Leichte Sprache* is no universal solution is the development of a bridging compromise variety between *Leichte Sprache*, which is maximally perceptible and comprehensible but risks acceptability, and more generally acceptable but less easy versions of *einfache Sprache* (in the figure translated as PL (plain language)). This additional bridging variety that should balance comprehensibility and acceptability is called "Easy Language Plus" (EL+; Maaß 2020). Maaß (2020: 231) explains that this balance "is achieved by reducing the most stigmatising features of Easy Language, but keeping the other features of Easy Language intact". Figure 3 illustrates this concept.
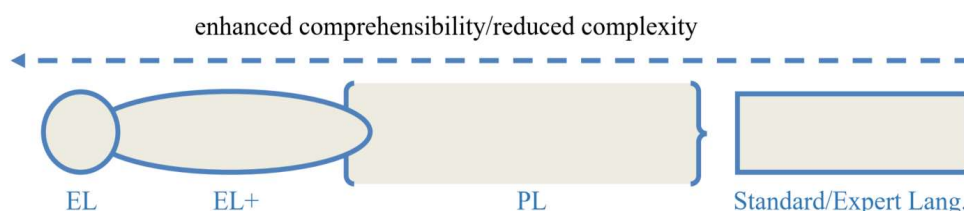

Figure 3: Easy Language Plus (Maaß 2020: 14)

Another management proposal concerns the benefits of clear rules. From the viewpoint that clear rules are beneficial or even necessary, the parallel existence of different rules is noted as a problem. There were proposed more than 10 different sets of rules by various organizations and researchers[17], which is evaluated negatively among those promoting *Leichte Sprache*.

A proposed adjustment design commissioned by the Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs was to develop standardized recommendations on *Leichte Sprache* as a Publicly

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[16] Original: „Grundsätzlich lässt sich die Angemessenheit von Leichte-Sprache-Texten nur *kontextabhängig* bestimmen."

[17] For a comparison of some of them see Bredel & Maaß 2016.

Available Specification (PAS) by the German Institute for Standardization (Deutsches Institut für Normung; DIN) (Maaß et al. 2021: 194). It soon became evident that overall consensus is difficult. In addition to other differences in concrete issues, there seemed to be a basic discrepancy between those who stressed the crucial importance of the involvement and opinions of persons from the target group and those who regarded academic criteria and professionalization indispensable to guarantee the quality. Despite these difficulties, in March 2023 a draft Guidance for German Easy Language was published to receive public comments[18]. A final version is expected for 2024.

3 Management processes of *yasashii nihongo* in Japan

Initial noting, evaluation and adjustment design

Let us now turn to the Japanese developments[19]. Here, two initial processes can be detected. The first began in 1995 after an earthquake in Western Japan called the Great Hanshin-Awaji earthquake. This earthquake coincided with a time when people from abroad living in Japan began to increase. The number of foreign residents exceeded one Million in 1991 and awareness of internationalization was rising in the Japanese society. After the earthquake, it was shared through media that many persons from abroad (foreign residents) were not able to understand necessary information provided in Japanese. The situation that these people are in a particularly insecure situation was negatively evaluated among those concerned with possibilities to help these persons with difficulty in access to information.

An adjustment design proposed by a group of sociolinguists was to provide minimally necessary information in simplified Japanese called *yasashii nihongo*. The word *yasashii* written in *hiragana* (Japanese syllabic writing) can be understood in two ways, as easy (易しい) and gentile (優しい). So, *yasashii nihongo* is intended to be easy to understand and gentile towards non-native speakers of Japanese. As this double meaning is difficult to translate into English, the Japanese term is kept in the following. Thus, originally, *yasashii nihongo* has emerged as a linguistic means of disaster mitigation for those inhabitants of foreign origin in Japan whose Japanese language ability is not high enough to understand essential disaster-related information written in standard Japanese. In Japanese, there is the additional problem of the complicated writing system using *kanji* (Chinese characters). To avoid that those who have some basic knowledge of oral Japanese cannot read the texts due to kanji, ruby characters (*furigana*) were added to kanji.

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[18] DIN SPEC 33429 Empfehlungen für Deutsche Leichte Sprache <https://www.din.de/de/wdc-beuth:din21:364785446>. Regaring its aim to get *Leichte Sprache* acknowledged as accomplished, the German Society for Easy Language decided to be dissolved at the end of May 2023 <https://dg-ls.de/>.

[19] For a general overview see Iori (ed.) 2020. Iori (2016) is a concise introduction in English.

Further noting, evaluation and adjustment design

After this initial initiative, further noting followed, this time led by those engaged in Japanese language education for foreigners, that similar problems can be found also in everyday life of foreign residents in Japan. These persons have problems to understand information in Japanese and have difficulties in communicating with the local population. It was evaluated that they are deprived of necessary information to orient themselves in Japan and have difficulties to be integrated in the society.

As an adjustment design, the idea of providing information in easy language was extended from emergency to everyday life. Further, the awareness that foreign residents have difficulties not only in getting written information but also in oral communication led to the idea of applying *yasashii nihongo* to the oral mode. On the other hand, *yasashii nihongo* was adopted also as a pedagogical approach to accelerate the acquisition of the Japanese language. By maximally utilizing minimum grammar and vocabulary, newcomers to Japan should be able to make themselves understood. Thus, *yasashii nihongo* became a multifaceted concept that should help orientation and integration of migrants in the Japanese society. The two directions, from native speakers of Japanese and from learners of Japanese, are illustrated in figure 4, which shows an ideal-typical scheme how *yasashii nihongo* would become the common language in local communities.

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 and vocabulary

Foreign residents

Figure 4: Two directions conducting to yasashii nihongo (Iori 2016:8)

Implementation

Summarizing the experiences of providing texts in *yasashii nihongo* so far, in 1999, a manual for information in emergency cases using *yasashii nihongo* was proposed by the Research Group of Japanese in Emergency, which became a basis for further development (Matsuda 2005: 243). In the following years, various guidelines were issued and texts following these guidelines were produced by local authorities and associations engaged in the integration of migrants. Further developments were the introduction of *yasashii nihongo* training sessions for native Japanese speakers. Such training courses are offered for special spheres as workplace communication or medical services, but also to interested citizens in general. On the side of Japanese language education, textbooks focusing on simple Japanese with a new grammatical syllabus were developed to enable a 'shortcut' in language learning.

In the meantime, *yasashii nihongo* has become a common notion at least among those engaged in or interested in communication with foreigners. Its usefulness is also claimed with regard to Deaf people, who have difficulties in learning and understanding Japanese as well. It seems to have been acknowledged in the information policy of municipalities towards foreign origin residents and tourists[20], but is also to some extent used in the private sector such as companies, shops and restaurants, which provide information in *yasashii nihongo* or declare the readiness to communicate in *yasashii nihongo*, if necessary. Further, the concept has been also included in Japanese governmental policy documents on "multicultural coexistence" (*tabunka kyosei*) since 2019[21]. A proposal on how to write official texts issued by the Council of Cultural Affairs in January 2022 recommends the use of *yasashii nihongo* for information to those who do not have Japanese as their mother tongue[22]. A "Collection of Model Cases on Multicultural Coexistence" (2021)[23] issued by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications contains examples of applying *yasashii nihongo* (see Kimura forthcoming).

Figure 5 shows part of the poster about wearing masks at the website of the Cabinet Secretariat in the language versions of Japanese (*nihongo,* 日本語) and in *yasashii nihongo*（やさしいにほんご）[24]. In contrast to the German case, the difference between the two versions is not so huge. The most evident feature of this *yasashii nihongo* version here is that it avoids the use of *kanji* entirely. It also uses words that are more commonly used in oral communication. For example, the poster in (ordinary) Japanese uses the written-language words "*okugai*"（屋外）"*okunai*"（屋内）, the easy-gentile version uses "*soto*"（そと）, "*naka*"（なか）, as used in everyday communication. The latter also explicitly mentions the subject "*anata*"（あなた, meaning "you"）, which is usually rather implicit in Japanese.

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[20] According to a survey by the Immigration Services Agency of Japan in April 2021 among municipalities throughout Japan, around 85 % responded to use *yasashii nihongo* in written texts and around 70% orally (https://www.moj.go.jp/isa/content/001356074.pdf).

[21] Yasashii nihongo no fukyu niyoru johoteikyo to no sokushin ni kansuru kentokaigi (2022) Yasashii nihongo no fukyu niyoru johoteikyo no sokushin no arikata <https://www.moj.go.jp/isa/policies/policies/12_00009.html>

[22] Bunkashingikai (2022) Koyobun sakusei no kangaekata <https://www.bunka.go.jp/seisaku/bunkashingikai/kokugo/hokoku/93657201.html>

[23] Somusho (2021) Tabunka kyosei jirei shu (Reiwa 3 nen ban) <https://www.soumu.go.jp/menu_seisaku/chiho/tabunkakyousei_suishin_r03.html>

[24] On this website, *yasashii nihongo* is translated as "Plain Japanese", but it is a separate version from the unmarked "normal" one.

Figure 5: Poster about wearing masks in standard Japanse and in yasashii nihongo[25]

Review/verification and toward a new management cycle

In the reflecting discourse after implementation, distinguishing *yasashii nihongo* from "normal" Japanese was repeatedly criticized as discriminatory towards speakers using Japanese as a 2nd language (Yasuda 2013: 335, see also Ito & Tokarev 2021). In reaction to this criticism, proponents have argued that *yasashii nihongo* should not be regarded as a separate entity of the Japanese language. Rather, what is needed is "a mindset to want to talk with or to know about foreigners" (Iori 2019: 3-4). It is also emphasized that *yasashii nihongo* is beneficial for native speakers of Japanese as well; it can function as a mirror to reflect upon their own use of Japanese and contribute to improve communication (Iori 2016: 15). It is further argued that an increased intelligibility is beneficial for speakers of Japanese in general (Iori 2022: 11). While the English terminology added to the text distinguishes easy and plain language, the Japanese text uses *yasashii nihongo* for both purposes. Here, the strategy seems to be to blur the difference between easy language for foreigners and plain language (mainly) for Japanese in order to make the former more acceptable for the majority, that is the native speakers of Japanese.

There is also criticism that question the usefulness of this concept. The main concern raised is that, despite its naming, *yasashii nihongo* is not easy. Abe (2019) points out that *yasashii nihongo* proposed and developed predominantly by university professors, often majoring Japanese language education, have in fact students from abroad in mind, whose learning capability and willingness cannot be generalized to others coming to Japan to work or to live

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[25] https://corona.go.jp/proposal/pdf/wearing_mask_2022056_01.pdf, https://corona.go.jp/ja-easy/toppage/pdf/ja-easy.MaskUseInCommunitySettings.20220801.pdf

with the family. According to him, only a part of the newcomers can reach the goal to understand Japanese well enough to be able to participate in social life.

Similarly, Inoue & Kurata (2020) argue that it is impossible for elementary level learners of Japanese to understand news or documents by pubic offices translated into *yasashii nihongo*. They claim that the texts translated into *yasashii nihongo* are "fictitious readings" for most of the foreign residents in Japan (Inoue & Kurata 2020: 47).

These reflections have led to the noting that especially written Japanese causes difficulties, even in a simplified form. Instead of basically thinking about simplifying written texts, which still seems to be the major approach of providing information through *yasashii nihongo*, Abe (2019) proposes to utilize videos and voice media. There are already an increasing number of videos available online for various purposes[26].

Nagata (2021) points out that the significance of written information in *yasashii nihongo* will diminish also due to technological development. *Yasashii nihongo* was originally proposed as a way out of the impossibility to provide information into various languages of foreign residents in Japan. In the meantime, however, machine translation has developed and can be used for public information. Nagata sees the future prospects of *yasashii nihongo* rather in the oral communication with foreigners in the vicinity, at work and with friends.

With regard to policy, Kusunoki & Hashimoto (2022) have pointed out a lack of coordinated policy by the Japanese government "that resulted in the ad hoc and inconsistent application and interpretation of YN [*yasashii nihongo*]" (624) on the one hand, and the lack of feedback from the foreign residents who should benefit from this type of communication on the other. About the first point, the report of the commission to promote the provision of information through the spread of *yasashii nihongo*, set up by the Immigration Services Agency and the Agency for Cultural Affairs, similarly argues for a more active policy by the government to accelerate the use of *yasashii nihongo*[27]. About the second point, there are attempts to assess the adequateness of explanations in *yasashii nihongo* (Yanagida 2020).

4 Comparison

Leichte Sprache and *yasashii nihongo* are superficially similar phenomena, adjusting language according to guidelines in order to create a more inclusive society. Both have emerged almost at the same time towards the end of the 20th century and increasingly implemented in the 21st century. Both concepts share also the starting point of being proposed as additional varieties to the existing standard language.

However, it cannot be overlooked that these concepts came out of entirely different contexts and developed differently, as was shown in the management process. The basis for noting and evaluation in Germany was the idea of equal participation of citizens in the society. The main focus was on native speakers of German who have difficulties in reading. In Japan there was

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[26] See for example a series of videos for medical situations <https://easy-japanese.info/archives/391>.

[27] See footnote 22.

the concern of integrating persons from abroad into the Japanese society. The leading actors in Germany were cognitively impaired and their supporters, whereas in Japan the enterprise of *yasashii nihongo* was led by sociolinguists and researchers of Japanese language and its education.

As with adjustment design, the German concept was restricting its function mainly to providing information. Proponents were keen to regulate its linguistic features in order to guarantee its effectiveness. In contrast, the Japanese *yasashii nihongo* was conceived to be applicable in various functions and contexts, including language education. In Germany, the implementation of *Leichte Sprache* reached the juridical level, situating the concept as linguistic means for achieving the policy aim or barrier-free access to information and making its use mandatory in some contexts. In Japan, *yasashii nihongo* has been implemented by various institutions at the local level and has come to be integrated into the state-level policy of multicultural coexistence, but its implementation is still uncoordinated.

Currently, there are tendencies in Germany to handle the guidelines more flexibly, but also a procedure towards elaborating a unified standard of *Leichte Sprache* and a proposal to develop an intermediate variety of *Leichte Sprache* closer to the usual standard. In Japan there seems to be a consensus not to strive for establishing *yasashii nihongo* as a new variety of the standard language but rather emphasizing the "mind" to adjust the language usage by Japanese natives to those learning Japanese. The border between standard Japanese and *yasashii nihongo* is intentionally kept unclear. There are prospects that the focus would shift to oral use.

Thus, differences could be detected throughout the whole management process. In short, there is no movement for "easy and gentile stile of German for foreigners" and there is no "legally approved variety of Easy Japanese for persons with cognitively impairment". Telling is the difference in the governmental institutions mainly in charge of easy language: the Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs in Germany and the Immigration Services Agency in Japan.

Nevertheless, both cases share similar challenges concerning acceptability or benefits of simplified languages. With regard to comparison of the two countries, the Japanese way of flexible conceptualization could be an interesting point of reference for the German discussion on whether standardizing easy language or not. On the other hand, in enhancing policy on easy language, the German experience of defining easy language rather strictly and acknowledging it legally could be inspiring for the discussion in Japan. Attempts to elaborate factors or indicators of adequateness beyond too strict adherence to rules in Germany (Bock 2019) and too vague emphasis of "mind" in Japan (Yanagida 2020) seem to head at a similar direction and could open a possibility to meet somewhere between the German and Japanese concepts.

The question of target groups of easy language is also essential. In Japan there is increasing awareness of the common interests in *yasashii nihongo* and proposals about information accessibility for the cognitively impaired, which is called "providing easy-to-understand information" (わかりやすい情報提供) (Uchinami 2018). In Germany, on the other hand,

there are tendencies to apply *Leichte Sprache* to oral formats (Maaß et al. 2021: 192) or in immigration contexts[28]. The reciprocal experiences could enrich each other in various manner.

5 Conclusion and further research perspectives

In this paper, the LMT-framework was used to illustrate the striking differences between seemingly similar linguistic phenomena. Despite their superficial similarity – both are promoted by issuing manuals and are increasingly visible on government websites and other public spheres – these two language varieties of the reciprocal standard language are situated in quite different social contexts. *Leichte Sprache* is understood as linguistic means for barrier-free access to information for those who have difficulty understanding complex texts and utterances. *Yasashii nihongo* is now conceived as a lingua franca-way to use Japanese in contrast to Japanese as native language and is also applied as a pedagogical approach to accelerate the acquisition of the Japanese language.

This chapter examined the management cycle of organized management. In future research, the micro-macro cycle between real usage and more macro level policy should also be investigated.

More generally, to probe the commonalities and differences among easy/simplified/plain languages in various countries and languages, focusing on and comparing the management process could be useful.

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[28] This tendency is discussed in Kimura (forthcoming).

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