

The graph(em)ic representation of Tōhoku dialect in contemporary Japanese prose

Hanna Jaśkiewicz

(Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań)

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This paper investigates the language attitudes and ideologies behind the graphic and graphemic representation of Tōhoku dialect in contemporary Japanese prose. Spoken in the north-west, rural part of the country, this variety is the most negatively perceived variety among Japanese dialects (Inoue 1989, Tanaka 2011), often subjected to ridicule through stigmatizing media depictions (Kumagai 2019). However, in recent years, especially after the Tohoku earthquake in 2011, there has been an increase in interest in this region, which has led to the publication of many literary works featuring this dialect. However, due to the complexities inherent in the Japanese writing system, comprising characters borrowed from Chinese and two moraic scripts, portraying the differences between standard Japanese and a dialect may pose considerable challenges. In this study ten contemporary novels were examined, exploring the strategies authors have adopted to address those difficulties. Particular attention was paid to the techniques used to represent non-standard phonology of this variety, the choice of script as well as other forms of visual representation of Tōhoku dialect. Based on the assumption that writing and spelling are also carriers of language attitudes (Spitzmüller 2012: 257), the ideological implications of these choices were also established. The results suggest that although the authors came up with several different strategies, most of them reinforce the prejudiced vision of the Tohoku dialect as primitive, foreign, and incomprehensible language variety.

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