

**Language environment and aspects of life and traveling in Japan from the  
perspective of native speakers of the Russian language**

日本国内での言語環境および生活や旅行の側面：ロシア語話者の視点から

Bogdan PAVLIY

**Abstract**

This research investigates the language situation in Toyama prefecture and the need for English and Russian information from the point of view of Russian-speaking students and visitors living or planning to live in the prefecture. The opinions of students were taken through the interviews with the exchange students from Ukraine and Russia that studied at Toyama University of International Studies in 2018-2020. Along with the interviews, the author conducted a survey on the preferences and demands of potential exchange students and visitors to Japan from Ukraine.

In this paper the author analyses the data of the survey, including priorities of the participants on destinations to study abroad and travel, their opinions concerning the necessity of English information in transport, hotels, restaurants, parks, museums, and tourist attractions, and their attitude towards information in the Russian language in Japan. The findings from the interviews with the exchange students and the survey show that access to free Wi-Fi along with the information in English would be sufficient for students from Ukraine who study or travel in Japan. Information, signs, or brochures in Russian are not of priority for the respondents.

**Keywords:** Toyama, language, English, Russian, international students, Ukraine

**Introduction**

Currently, there are many opportunities to find information in Russian in Toyama prefecture. Toyama prefecture is attractive for Russians as one of the best places for Japan-Russia trade. The prefecture has a reputation of being clean, easy to live and comparatively inexpensive. The expansion of the Russian language in the Toyama area in comparison to other regions of Japan is not a new phenomenon: “Being located near the Asian continent, contact between Japan, China, Korea and Russia has continued

from ancient times” (Newport, 1988:24). Because of the close relationship between Toyama prefecture and Russian Far East region, especially in the coastal area of the Sea of Japan, the necessity of Russian language education is being emphasized in educational facilities in the prefecture. Some local high schools, vocational schools or colleges, and most universities provide Russian classes. The official website of Toyama prefecture has pages with the information in Russian. Signs and instructions in Russian are seen on the roads and railroad stations; brochures and other information can be found in shops, companies, museums, schools and other educational institutions, hotels and even in public spas, or *onsen*, in Toyama and other cities in the prefecture.

Russian language is used as a first or a second language not only in Russia but also in some other former Soviet Union republics. Ukraine is one of those former Russian-speaking countries that have a high interest in Japan. During the late 2010s the number of sushi restaurants, *yakitoriya*, and other types of Japanese restaurants has increased rapidly, and the number of people who are interested in modern Japanese culture, including technology, performing arts, anime and manga is also on the increase. Tatsuma (2006) mentions that according to the 2004 report “Survey on Japanese Language Education Abroad,” approximately 2000 people were learning Japanese at Japanese language institutions throughout Ukraine, which was the second-largest number of learners in all 12 NIS countries after Russia (Tatsuma, 2006:127). Since that time the number of learners decreased to 1319 people in 2012 but later began to rise up to 1523 people in 2015 and 2174 people in 2018 (Japan Foundation Survey Report on Japanese-Language Education Abroad, 2015, 2018).

We can expect that in the future some of those learners of Japanese from Ukraine will come to Japan on study programs, or along with the general public as tourists. This study investigates the necessity of signs, brochures, and other information in Russian and English in Japan from the perspective of former and current exchange students from Ukraine. In spring 2018, Toyama University of International Studies signed an academic exchange agreement with the prestigious Ukrainian high educational institution Odesa Mechnikov National University and both universities have provided student exchange programs since that time. The author interviewed exchange students during their course at Toyama University of International Studies, visited the Department of International Relations at Odesa Mechnikov National University in August 2019, and conducted a survey focusing on students studying Japanese in that department. The survey also included the general public and those Ukrainians who had studied in Japan or stayed there for a long time.

### **Purpose, plan, and method of the research**

With the decision of Japan to hold Olympic and Paralympic Games in 2021, it is important to reconsider the necessity of information, brochures, and signs in English and Russian in Japan. The purpose of this study is to investigate the necessity of promoting the spread of Russian expressions in the Toyama area. The research is based on the opinions of Russian-speaking international students studying Japanese. We consider the importance of Russian signs, brochures, and other information in Russian to make Toyama prefecture more attractive to the students and revitalize tourist destinations in the Hokuriku area.

As this research is focused on sociological rather than linguistic purposes, the investigation was conducted through field research, by methods of conducting interviews and questionnaire survey widely used in sociology. Having conducted the interviews with the exchange students from Ukraine and Russia in Toyama University of International Studies, the researcher found that all interviewees stressed the necessity of signs, announcements, and information in English rather than Russian information and signs. To go further in dealing with this phenomenon, the researcher provided a survey in Odesa Mechnikov National University, focused mainly on the wishes and priorities of those students, who study Japanese and plan to go to Japan in the future. Data have been collected and analyzed based on the questionnaires with the 50 participants. 30 participants were those who study Japanese at Odesa Mechnikov National University, 10 respondents were Ukrainians who lived in Japan for one year or longer, and 10 respondents were young residents of Odesa (general public). The respondents were Ukrainian citizens of both genders. An integrated approach was used in dealing with the data: the qualitative approach has been used for data collection through interviews, and the quantitative approach has been employed to analyze the results of the questionnaire survey and provide a numerical representation.

### **Findings from interviews**

In this research the author was able to investigate the necessity of information in English and Russian from the point of view of Ukrainian and Russian exchange students in Japan. Interviews with the students revealed that when traveling or studying abroad in Japan, there is no need in particular for Russian information or signs but the presence of the signs and guidance information in English is essential.

According to the interviewees, there are many places in the Hokuriku area where English guidance and information in English is lacking. In Toyama city they mentioned first of all local Chitetsu bus and tram service along with the Chitetsu railroad in Toyama city, and the local bus and Manyo line in Takaoka city. Students have difficulties in finding the way from JR (Ai-no-kaze) Takaoka station to Manyo line. As one of the students (female, 20-year-old) said: “When it came to changing trains, it was in the same building, but because it was a different line, different transport, and because everything was in Japanese, we got lost. We had to go to the Tourist information center. I asked them where it [Manyo line] is and they explained and said that over there only one line exists, so we should not get lost. Eventually, it was easy to find the line, but before we came to that center, we walked around for about 5-10 minutes trying to find it [Manyo line] by ourselves.”

Furthermore, even getting to Toyama from Narita airport may be a challenge for those students who are not fluent in Japanese. For example, regarding the purchase of tickets, students were unsatisfied not only with the situation in Toyama but also in Tokyo and its vicinities. The interviewees mentioned the difficulties in purchasing train tickets on the Keisei line, Narita Express line, and Ueno station (shinkansen to Toyama). For example, the students from Russia (Vladivostok State University of Economics and Service) had difficulties in buying shinkansen tickets to Toyama in Tokyo (at Ueno station). As one of the respondents (female, 19-year-old) describes it: “We came to the Ueno station, but could not find any ticket window where we could buy our tickets. We could only find the ticket vending machine, and so we tried to buy the tickets there, using the English guidance on the screen, but it was too complicated for us. So, we had to ask a Japanese man who stood in line behind us. Fortunately, he could speak a little English, but he also did not know how to buy the ticket with English instructions on the screen. So, he switched the screen to Japanese, and helped us to find Toyama as a destination and buy our tickets. But still, we had a problem, because we did not know if we should buy reserved tickets, or non-reserved, and it was difficult to find out what shinkansen goes to Toyama. But we have realized that it is much easier to buy tickets in a vending machine using Japanese guidance.”

Students also mentioned that even when they get to the platform, it was not easy for them to find which train they should take, because the final destination of the shinkansen train is not Toyama but Kanazawa and they were not sure if they could take this train because they had non-reserved tickets.

Another serious disadvantage for foreign visitors to Japan appears to be the lack of free Wi-Fi (or bad connection to free Wi-Fi) in shops, tourist spots, restaurants,

transport, and especially at the train or bus stations. All of the interviewees complained about the quality and the accessibility of free Wi-Fi in Japan, especially in the Toyama area. There were comments such as, “While it is easy to find a way with an interactive map, I could not find a Free Wi-Fi spot even at the station,” or “So often, even if you can find the place with the sign *Free Wi-Fi spot*, in reality, it does not connect. This is just a waste of time.”

### **Results of the survey**

Having conducted the interviews with the exchange students, the author studied the necessity of information in English and Russian from the point of view of the Ukrainian youth. To investigate the interest of Ukrainians in the Hokuriku region, the author also checked their preferences in visiting/living in a particular region of Japan; their preferences to live in megapolis, city, or countryside; and their attitude towards very snowy regions. The author conducted the questionnaire survey on learners of Japanese from Odesa Mechnikov National University, Ukrainians who studied in Japan, and the general public. The questions in this survey partially overlap with the questions in previous research, conducted by the author in 2013. The research focused on the preferences of the learners of Japanese language from Kyiv National Linguistic University and may be of some interest to readers, to compare the priorities of the students from different regions of Ukraine (Pavliy, 2013). The results of that research are published only in Japanese.

#### *Preferences of the respondents*

Table 1 shows us the most popular destinations to study abroad and travel for the survey participants. Among the three most popular regions are Kanto: 28 respondents (21.5%), Kansai: 25 (19.2%), and Okinawa: 19 (14.6%). Hokuriku region was prioritized by thirteen respondents (10.0%) and became the fourth most popular region among all respondents. Particularly noticeable from the data is that Kanto and Kansai were the most attractive among the participants who had never been to Japan, but the students who had already studied in Japan were interested more in Okinawa, Kyushu, and Hokkaido. The general public is equally interested in Kanto, Kansai, Hokkaido, and Okinawa. Hokuriku is attractive to students who are studying Japanese but have not visited Japan yet.

Table 1. Which region of Japan the respondents would like to visit when traveling or studying in Japan (up to 3 choices)

Region of Japan	Learners of Japanese in Odesa University	Students and researchers who studied in Japan	General public	Total (%)
1. Hokkaido	2	5	4	11 (8.5%)
2. Tohoku (North and North-East of Honshu)	3	1	0	4 (3.1%)
3. Kanto (Tokyo, Kanagawa, Saitama, Gunma, Chiba, Ibaraki)	18	5	5	28 (21.7%)
4. Shinshu, mountain regions (Niigata, Nagano, Yamanashi )	7	2	2	11 (8.5%)
5. Hokuriku, Sea of Japan (Fukui, Ishikawa, Toyama)	12	1	0	13 (10.1%)
6. Tokai (Aichi, Gifu, Shizuoka, Mie)	1	0	2	3 (2.3%)
7. Kansai (Osaka, Kyoto, Hyogo)	17	3	4	24 (18.6%)
8. Chugoku (Hiroshima, Okayama, Yamaguchi, Tottori, Shimane)	4	2	1	7 (5.4%)
9. Shikoku	0	0	1	1 (0.8%)
10. Kyushu	1	5	2	8 (6.2%)
11. Okinawa	9	6	4	19 (14.7%)

Table 2 shows the preferences of young Russian-speaking Ukrainians concerning their possible place to live in Japan. It could be expected that youth, especially students, would be more interested in big cities (Tokyo, Osaka); however, our data shows that most of the respondents (33 people, or 66%) would prefer to live in the middle-sized Japanese cities (population: 200,000 or more and 1 million or less). Major cities in all three prefectures of the Hokuriku region belong to that category: Kanazawa (population: 462,890), Toyama (414,185), Fukui (261,350). Less than one-quarter of the respondents (22%) intend to study or live in a megapolis or a big city in Japan.

Table 2. What type of city respondents prefer to live in when study or travel in Japan?

	Learners of Japanese in Odesa University	Students and researchers who studied in Japan	General public	Total (%)
1. Megapolis, big city (population more than 1 million )	6	4	1	11(22%)
2. City (population 100 000 – 1000000 people )	20	6	7	33(66%)
3. Small town, village (population less than 100 000 people )	3	0	2	5(10%)

In Toyama prefecture, as well as in all Hokuriku region, there is a lot of snowfall in winter. As we can see from Table 3, more than one-fourth of the respondents (14 people (28%)) answered that it is desirable to live in regions with snowy seasons and only two respondents (4%) answered that they would prefer to have no snow. It can be concluded that the Hokuriku area, and Toyama prefecture in particular, can be very attractive to Ukrainian students and visitors from that perspective.

Table 3. Opinions of the respondents about snow in winter.

	Learners of Japanese in Odesa University	Students and researchers who studied in Japan	General public	Total (%)
1. Snow in winter is preferable	9	1	4	14(28%)
2. I do not want to live in a place with a lot of snow in winter	0	1	1	2(4%)
3. It does not make a difference	21	8	5	34(68%)

*Need for information and guidance in English from the point of view of the survey respondents*

Table 4 shows the results of the survey on the need for information and guidance in English in transport, shops, and tourist facilities. This issue was investigated using a numerical rating scale (0-5).

The data consists of four items: (1) English information in transport and at stations; (2) English information in museums, parks, temples and shrines; (3) English information in tourist facilities such as hotels, traditional Japanese inns (*ryokan*), and hot springs; (4) information in restaurants (English menu and service). According to the results of the survey, the most important for Russian-speaking people is information and guidance in English in transport and at the stations (average score: 4.1). The respondents also prefer to have information in English in museums, parks, temples, shrines (average score: 3.9), hotels, *ryokan*, hot springs (average score: 3.9). The need for English in service and menus in restaurants is relatively low (average score: 3.6).

Table 4. Opinions of the respondents about the importance of information in English.

	Learners of Japanese in Odesa University	Students and researchers who studied in Japan	General public	Total (%)
How important is information in English in transport and at the stations?	128 points average score: 4.3	31 point average score: 3.1	48 points average score: 4.8	207 points average score: 4.1
How important is information in English in museums, parks, temples, shrines?	119 points average score: 4.0	32 points average score: 3.2	43 points average score: 4.3	194 points average score: 3.9
How important is information in English in hotels, <i>ryokan</i> , hot spas?	120 points average score: 4.0	26 points average score: 2.6	48 points average score: 4.8	194 points average score: 3.9
How important is information in English in restaurants?	107 points average score: 3.6	25 points average score: 2.5	46 points average score: 4.6	178 points average score: 3.6

Considering the data of the survey along with the results of interviews with exchange students, we can conclude that the lack of English directions and information in transport (including taxi) and signs and explanations in English at the stations in the biggest cities of Toyama prefecture (Toyama and Takaoka) is a major problem for



international students and tourists. Finding a way or changing trains in a station with no reliable free Wi-Fi connection is a serious challenge for people who are not fluent in Japanese.

The data was also taken on how students and travelers from Ukraine evaluate their ability to get to Toyama from Tokyo by shinkansen or bus without being accompanied by someone fluent in Japanese. The results are shown in Table 5. Most of the respondents (28 people (56%)) consider that to be an attainable, but not so easy task. Almost one-third of the respondents (15 people (30%)) see no difficulties in getting from Tokyo to Toyama alone. However, seven respondents (14%), including an exchange student who needed to be accompanied from Toyama to Tokyo, answered that they are not able to do that. According to the interview with the exchange students, two of them emphasized that Tokyo Station and Ueno Station were too crowded, it was difficult to find the shinkansen to Toyama, and they were not confident that they could go alone, especially with a lot of luggage.

Table 5. Opinions of the respondents about their ability to get from Tokyo to Toyama without being accompanied by a speaker of Japanese.

	Learners of Japanese in Odesa University	Students and researchers who studied in Japan	General public	Total (%)
Yes, I can easily do that	5	9	1	15(30%)
It would not be that easy but I can do that	22	0	6	28(56%)
I cannot do that	3	1	3	7(14%)

*Need for information and guidance in Russian from the point of view of the survey respondents*

Toyama has more information, brochures, and signs in Russian than most other prefectures in Japan, so we also investigated whether it would be beneficial for Russian-speaking people who come to Japan to study or travel. It is as shown in Table 6. Thirty-two (64%) of the respondents think that it is unnecessary for them to have information, signs, or brochures in Russian. Eighteen respondents (36%) answered that it is desirable to study or travel in the regions of Japan where information in Russian is provided.

Table 6. Toyama prefecture has a lot of information and signs in Russian and there is also a Russian website of the prefecture. Do respondents consider it to be an advantage when they decide where to study or travel in Japan?

	Learners of Japanese in Odesa University	Students and researchers who studied in Japan	General public	Total (%)
1. Yes, areas with a lot of information, signs, and brochures in Russian are comfortable because of the language, and it is desirable to study or travel to that area.	10	1	7	18(36%)
2. It makes no difference for me.	14	7	1	22(44%)
3. I would prefer areas where less information in Russian is provided.	6	2	2	10(20%)

### Conclusions and applications for future research

My findings from the interviews with seven Russian-speaking exchange students, who spent half a year at Toyama University of International Studies, and from the survey accomplished in Odesa city (Odesa Mechnikov National University) show that for students from Russian-speaking countries coming to study or travel in Japan, the existence of information and guidance in English (especially in transport and at the stations) is more important than information, signs or brochures in Russian. The combination of reliable free Wi-Fi along with the accessibility of English information at stations and in transport is considered to be the most effective and convenient for the students to find their way in Japan.

In the future, I plan to conduct a comparative study based on the results of research on students studying Japanese in Ukraine. Considering the necessity for Russian-speaking people to have English information, signs, and guidance in Japan, it would be interesting to investigate in which language for information (Ukrainian, Japanese, Russian, English) in Ukraine would be more attractive and necessary for Japanese students. With that, the language environment can be improved, and guidelines on how to better engage the youth of Japan and Ukraine in tourism and cultural exchange can be provided. I also aim to increase the number of participants in

the research and contribute to the international activities facilitating cross-cultural exchange between Japan and Ukraine.

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