

The International Promotion of the National Language in France and Japan

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Abstract

The national language serves as a central instrument for communicating cultural differences and fostering a sense of identity among individuals. It is also employed internationally to project a favourable image of a state. Governments engage in activities to teach their language in foreign countries, although these practices vary according to each state's cultural values and history. In the cases of France and Japan, both states have historically mobilised their culture as a tool for influence, albeit to varying degrees. While the status of French as an international language has long been integral to France's diplomacy, the Japanese language does not benefit from the same global reach, despite the influence of popular culture on its international dissemination. Consequently, these two languages currently hold divergent statuses that affect their promotion overseas. This article aims to answer the question: How do France and Japan instrumentalise language as a tool for projecting national identity? For this purpose, this study investigates how the historical traditions and legacy of both languages influence these policies and how decision-makers legitimise them through explicit or implicit references to identity. Whereas the mobilisation of the French language explicitly advances a universal objective and relies on specific cultural values, Japan constructs its discourse around the principle of mutual understanding, presenting Japanese as a means of gaining the trust of foreign audiences.

Keywords

culture; France; identity; Japan; narratives; national language

1. Introduction

The national language is a fundamental component of a nation, whether *de jure* or *de facto*. Defined as “a language (or a variant of a language, e.g., a dialect) that has some connection—*de facto* or *de jure*—with people and the territory/territories they occupy” (Fathi, 2023, p. 2), it constitutes a crucial instrument for communicating and reaffirming cultural distinctiveness (Kamusella, 2001) and fostering a sense of identity among populations (Blommaert, 1996). States defend and value it to varying degrees through cultural policies and might bestow upon it a political role or even a sacred character, both domestically and internationally. A language can be mobilised by political elites to reaffirm cultural differences *vis-à-vis* others (Kamusella, 2001), a process that rests on a firm (or weak) sense of national identity. National identity may be understood as a complex of shared conceptions, emotional dispositions and attitudes, and behavioural conventions that are collectively held and internalised through socialisation (Wodak, 2009). Furthermore, its promotion overseas has become an essential tool for influence, as it helps introduce a country to the public and project a positive self-image. Governments, therefore, engage in activities aimed at the learning and teaching of a state’s language in other countries, although these practices vary according to each state’s cultural values and history (Özkan, 2015).

As the objects of cross-cultural studies on Europe and Asia (Foret & Hino, 2021), France and Japan were chosen as case studies based on the most similar systems design approach: they share similarities but produce different outcomes (Steinmetz, 2019). Despite the implementation of divergent styles of diplomacy, culture holds a specific position in both states (Fregonese & Sakai, 2021). Historically, cultural initiatives have been employed as a mechanism to restore influence: whereas France strengthened its cultural network following the 1870 Sedan defeat (with culture serving as a means of elite consensus), Japan engaged extensively in cultural diplomacy during the post-war period to counter its militaristic image. The government launched a “pop-culture” diplomacy in the 1990s as its primary diplomatic tool due to its effectiveness (Iwabuchi, 2018). This approach enabled Japan to enhance its soft power, defined as the ability to attract rather than coerce (Nye, 2008). In contrast, French diplomacy relies on the country’s attractiveness, the teaching of the French language, and the spread of French culture abroad (Fregonese & Sakai, 2021). However, their respective histories represent divergent processes that have exerted a long-term influence on how they promote their image and language overseas. Whereas the French language’s status as an international language (spoken on five continents and used within international organisations) has long been an essential part of France’s diplomacy, the Japanese language does not have the same scope, although popular culture significantly contributed to its spread overseas.

The use of the French and Japanese languages has been examined from a multidisciplinary perspective (encompassing fields such as politics, linguistics, or marketing) by French and English-speaking scholars. However, it is to be noted that further research is needed to strengthen the understanding of the relationship between these two languages and national identity. Several authors have analysed the use of French as a diplomatic tool, particularly during the colonial period, with the creation of the *Alliance Française* (AF) in 1883, an organisation initially tasked with promoting the French language in the colonies as part of the so-called “civilising mission” (Chaubet, 2004). Gazeau-Secret (2010), Lane (2013), and Hourquebie (2023) focus on the use of French in international relations and diplomacy as part of France’s foreign policy activities. More generally, the existing literature brings together analyses of the Francophone presence and the implementation of this language policy on a global scale, although it would benefit from further insights

into the cultural values promoted internationally. In the Japanese case, existing scholarship gathers historiographic, communication, and linguistic contributions on the history of Japanese language education, on representations of the Japanese language in textbooks (Matsumoto & Okamoto, 2003), and on its use as a tool of governance in colonial contexts at the expense of local languages (Yasuda, 2019). More recently, several English-speaking scholars have analysed the promotion of Japanese language and culture through the Japan Foundation (JF), an independent administrative institution in charge of the dissemination of Japanese culture and language overseas, in various countries such as China (Vyas, 2008) and Bulgaria (Gadjeva, 2022). The role of language promotion and cultural communication in building Japan's soft power (Gu & Deng, 2024) has become a topic of significant interest in the current literature. McConnell (2015) examines the Japanese Exchange and Teaching Program, an international exchange programme between young graduates that implements foreign language education, as a vehicle for Japan's cultural diplomacy and soft power. Similarly, Otmazgin (2012) analysed the evolution of Japan's cultural diplomacy in Asia, including the promotion of the Japanese language in its ex-colonies (such as China and Korea) as a means of reinforcing their integration with Japan, as well as the later reimplementation of cultural diplomacy policies following the 1945 defeat and the necessity for Japan to mitigate its militaristic image. Nevertheless, current research on the promotion of national languages in France and Japan has insufficiently addressed the role of political figures in mobilising language to construct national identity and deploy national narratives for this purpose, a gap that this article seeks to fill.

This article evaluates how diplomatic actors engage with foreign audiences, how they justify these strategies through explicit or non-explicit references to national identity, and how the historical traditions and legacies of both languages shape these policies, aiming to answer the research question: how do France and Japan instrumentalise language as a tool for projecting national identity? This study is structured into six sections. First, it presents the theoretical framework and the methodology employed. Then, explores the relationship between national language and national identity, arguing that domestic politics help explain a state's foreign policy decisions. Finally, it conducts an empirical examination of political narratives concerning the official language as articulated by diplomatic actors in both states, aiming to comprehend its utilisation as a diplomatic resource.

2. Theory

This study employs a constructivist framework to examine how the external communication strategies of France and Japan function to advance their national identity and interests internationally. While various forms of constructivism exist, its advocates generally argue that the material world both influences and is influenced by human interactions, contingent upon the interpretations of the world (Adler, 2005, as cited in Zehfuss, 2002). Unlike realist theorists, this approach acknowledges the role of ideational factors such as norms, beliefs, and culture. These beliefs construct the actors' identities and interests (Jung, 2019) and impact social and political action (Reus-Smit, 2005). Through their activities, states can comprehend one another and develop their identities, which are conditioned by discursive formations (Erbas, 2022). Regarding the present case, diplomacy—as a policy through which actors establish relationships and influence opinions—values positions and norms to influence audiences and achieve objectives (Byrne, 1995). More specifically, culture is regarded as a diplomatic tool that is instrumentalised to achieve a state's objectives through the foreign policy process (Schmidt, 2003, as cited in Kim, 2017). In applying this

framework to the present case study, the aim is to understand how the official language is employed and constructed to promote the identities of France and Japan and a favourable image of both states.

3. Methodology

In examining the strategies employed by French and Japanese decision-makers, narrative analysis is adopted as the initial method, which is a well-suited approach to the study of identities and their construction (Coman et al., 2016). A national narrative is a social phenomenon that facilitates the formation of relationships among individuals, thereby fostering cohesion (Ledoux, 2021). The primary objective is to identify expressions of identity through an analysis of the form and content of narratives (Patterson & Monroe, 1998), notably by examining the speakers, the moral of the story, the mechanisms through which the story is constructed (Coman et al., 2016), and references to national identity (Anderson, 2017; Ledoux, 2021). This analysis will be conducted manually, without the use of specific software. Additionally, qualitative content analysis (QCA) is employed for shorter material, specifically policy documents or brief speeches, in cases where narratives are inaccessible. QCA is defined as “the systematic reduction of content, analyzed with special attention to the context in which it was created, to identify themes and extract meaningful interpretations of the data” (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015, p. 232, as cited in Roller, 2019). The aim is to analyse the direct message of a discourse, which can be accessed through the examination of its lexicon (Coman et al., 2016) and themes, based on manual analysis. Table 1 provides a more detailed overview of the methodology and the selected material:

Table 1. Selected material.

State	Documents	Type of analysis	What is examined?
France	4 presidential speeches 3 budget bills	Narrative analysis QCA	Form of the narratives: By whom was this story constructed? For whom? Why is the <i>succession of events</i> configured this way (Coman et al., 2016)?
Japan	5 Diplomatic Bluebooks 5 JF's annual reports	QCA QCA: Main themes	Content of the narratives: Discursive references to national identity, such as <i>historical events</i> , <i>emblematic figures</i> , <i>symbols</i> (Ledoux, 2021), or <i>places of memory</i> (Anderson, 2017)

Sources: Anderson (2017); Coman et al. (2016); Ledoux (2021); Patterson and Monroe (1998).

The material comprises four speeches delivered by French Presidents Jacques Chirac (1995), Nicolas Sarkozy (2010), François Hollande (2014), and Emmanuel Macron (2018), which were selected on the basis of two criteria: First, presidential discourses were prioritised due to their role as the primary representatives of the state in international contexts. Second, the analysis concentrates on addresses delivered to foreign audiences during the Sommet de la Francophonie (Francophonie Summit), a summit organised by the Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie (n.d.), an international organisation that promotes the French language and plurilingualism. During this event, heads of state and government convene to discuss the strategic directions of the French-speaking world. The analysis, therefore, focuses on how speakers legitimise this policy at the international level and enhance the state's image, thereby not prioritising domestic audiences. Furthermore, QCA was conducted on budgetary documents published by the government to gain further insight into how policy-makers justify this policy. In the case of Japan, speeches by the prime minister were inaccessible. To address this gap, five Diplomatic Bluebooks (providing descriptions of Japan's annual diplomatic activities) from 1991 to 2022 were selected as key sources, along

with five annual reports published by the JF, which were then qualitatively analysed without the use of software. All relevant materials are available on government websites, and the links are provided in the bibliography.

4. The Relationship Between Language and National Identity in France and Japan

This section provides a historical overview of both languages, demonstrating how French may be regarded as a means of protecting national sovereignty and Japanese as an implicit affirmation of Japan's monolingualism.

4.1. French as the *De Jure* National Language

French was established as the official language in 1539 through the Ordinance of Villers-Cotterêts, followed by the founding of the Académie Française in 1635. The reign of Louis XIV (1643–1715) is often regarded as a period during which France actively sought to extend the influence of the French language beyond its borders. The king aimed to assert France's power within Europe, transforming the nation into a significant market that attracted numerous foreign merchants. French culture proliferated through theatre, and the language gained prominence in literary works. These factors contributed to the widespread adoption of French. The monarchy continued its efforts to refine the language by simplifying it and eliminating hyperboles, complex metaphors, and compound words. French thus became a political tool in Europe, increasingly employed by diplomats during negotiations (Bély, 2017). Between the 16th and 19th centuries, French gained prominence as the language of diplomacy and international relations (Mehtiyev, 2011). Despite this development, the majority of the population continued to speak regional dialects until the Revolution of 1789, when the Convention declared French the sole language of the Republic. It defended its universalisation and imposition, a process that gradually unfolded over the subsequent century. At the educational level, for instance, French was used within the *Écoles normales*, higher education institutions responsible for training the nation's future executives. Under the Third Republic (1870–1940), Minister Jules Ferry established free and compulsory elementary schools that exclusively used French as the language of instruction (Chevalier, 2009). During the colonial era, the government augmented the political role of the AF in 1883, and the elites responsible for disseminating French portrayed it as the language of progress (Canut, 2010), advocating its purity, clarity, and universality (Hiddleston, 2004). The establishment of the AF thus represents a forum for reflection on the language and a means of elevating it to a political cause (Roselli, 1996). As the political and economic structures of the colonies developed, the enforcement of French as the language of instruction and administration facilitated its widespread adoption. Its implementation in Africa mirrored the linguistic standardisation model employed in post-Revolutionary France, often disregarding local languages (Canut, 2010). This dissemination was also believed to enhance the French diaspora's capacity to manage economic interests abroad, as the spread of the language was thought to foster increased exchanges and the export of trade goods and religious texts (Chaubet, 2004). In this context, French became an instrument of colonisation and a highly ideological tool (Vigouroux, 2013).

Consequently, France has a long-standing tradition of state intervention in matters of language, a "state affair" (Ministère de la Culture, n.d.). The Fifth Republic witnessed a progressive institutionalisation of French as part of its cultural heritage, through which it acquired a particular status. French became concretely politicised with its incorporation into Article 2 of the 1958 Constitution in 1992 (Cité Internationale de la Langue Française, n.d.), which states that the language of the Republic is French; but also into its Title XIV, *De la Francophonie et*

des accords d'association, whose Article 87 affirms that “the Republic takes part in the development of solidarity and cooperation between States and peoples who share the French language” (French Constitution, 1958, Article 87). This constitutional consecration occurred in the context of the European construction and the internationalisation of exchanges (Ministère de la Culture, n.d.), during which the national language became a sensitive issue and a way to protect France’s sovereignty. Prompted by the ratification of the Maastricht Treaty, the inclusion of this article in the constitution was perceived less as a legal innovation than as an expression of national sovereignty (Arlettaz, 2012).

The enactment of additional legislation followed this constitutional consecration. Two key acts warrant particular attention. The first is the 1994 Toubon law, named after former Minister of Culture Jacques Toubon, who sought to safeguard the French language within the fields of advertising, audiovisual media, teaching, and labour. The drafting of the law occurred during a period characterised by the growing prevalence of anglicisms, prompting policy-makers to prioritise French terminology over English (Péault, 2022). The first article states that French is a fundamental component of France’s personality and heritage; that it serves as the language of instruction, work, and public services; and that it establishes a privileged link among French-speaking nations. While this text clearly defines the legal scope of the French language, it should not be seen as an attempt to exclude foreign terms. Rather, it seeks to position French as a tool for social cohesion and a means of international communication within the context of globalisation (Avenir de la Langue Française, n.d.). Additionally, the decree of 3 July 1996 on the enrichment of the French language (*relatif à l’enrichissement de la langue française*) established a commission responsible for examining the new words and concepts intended to enrich the language. On the premise that French should adapt to the realities of the modern world, legislators encouraged public services to use simple and precise vocabulary in order to ensure intelligible communication. The decree thus introduced new obligations concerning public documents, which must be drafted using terms and expressions published in the *Journal Officiel* (the Government gazette) rather than foreign appellations (Girardin & Vallini, 2024). Taken together, these legislative measures illustrate the centrality of language preservation in French political discourse and contribute to the institutionalisation of French as a fundamental element of national culture, in contrast to the status accorded to the Japanese language within Japan.

4.2. Japanese as the *De Facto* National Language

Two concepts currently define the Japanese language: *kokugo*, which translates as the national language (*koku* meaning “nation” and *go* meaning “language”), and *nihongo*, which refers to the Japanese language itself. Its political status differs from that of French, as it functions as Japan’s *de facto* official language.

Japan experienced significant linguistic fragmentation prior to the Meiji Era (1868–1912), with various dialects (Ramsey, 2004). Elites argued that a common language was essential for effective collaboration, particularly in the aftermath of the 1894–1895 Sino–Japanese War victory. Policy-makers believed that the military required a standardised language to facilitate rapid and efficient communication, and they reflected on the potential of Japanese to serve as a unifying force as the nation emerged (Clark, 2020). Consequently, the Restoration of 1868—a political process aimed at modernising Japan—sought to establish a unified modern state, partly through linguistic unification (Lee, 2004, as cited in Sato & Doerr, 2014) and the development of a standardised form of communication (Clark, 2020). This initiative was underpinned by the belief that standardised discourses and practices would provide the foundation for a government capable of

positioning itself alongside other global powers (Sato & Doerr, 2014). Similar to the situation in France, the purpose of *kokugo* was thus to foster a sense of unity within the nascent Japanese nation (Heinrich, 2012). Additionally, the Russo–Japanese War of 1904–1905 marked the emergence of Japan on the international stage, prompting authorities to implement new policies mandating the use of a distinct national language. As part of an assimilation policy, the use of the Okinawan and Ainu languages was prohibited (Gottlieb, 2011). Authorities required *kokugo* to be taught as the standard language in education and mandated that Nippon Hōsō Kyōkai (Japan Broadcasting Corporation), upon commencing its broadcasts in the 1920s, employed certified speakers of *hyōjungo* (the “standard language”) to enhance public awareness of the spoken norm (Ramsey, 2004). Concurrently, Japanese was disseminated in the Taiwanese and Korean colonies as part of an assimilationist policy aimed at building a unified Japanese-speaking community. Resistance in both colonies led to coercive assimilation and discrimination against non-Japanese culture and dialects. *Kokugo* was thus constructed as an ideology designed to develop national consciousness, and the establishment of Japan as a nation-state went hand-in-hand with its emergence as a fully fledged nationalist discourse (Tai, 2003), contributing to the construction and maintenance of Japan’s national identity (Lee, 2017). Initially, Japanese was not employed as a diplomatic tool but rather as a means for unification and standardisation, mirroring France’s policy during the 19th century. Today, Japan is one of the few countries that has not enshrined the status of the Japanese in its constitution (Saruhashi, 2008), rendering it a *de facto* official language in Japan, as opposed to French.

Following the end of the Second World War, the absence of a linguistic provision in the constitution reflected the decision not to treat language as a political issue and, more broadly, a belief in Japan’s monolingualism (Kimura, 2010). The issue of Japan’s monolingualism has been widely raised during the post-war period; however, it would be erroneous to regard Japan as linguistically homogeneous, as numerous dialects exist across the country, including those of Kyushu, Okinawa, and Hokkaido. During the 1970s, advocates of the nationalist *nihonjinron* discourse affirmed that Japan was monolingual and internally homogeneous, and that *nihongo* was accessible only to native Japanese speakers (Rear, 2017) due to “unique” characteristics (Haugh, 1998)—Japanese was presented as particularly difficult to learn compared to other languages and as embodying a distinct spirit. This traditionalist view long dominated Japanese politics and society. Indeed, decades later, the importance of a standard language in the nation-building process remained deeply embedded in public opinion. A survey conducted in 2001 by the Agency for Cultural Affairs indicated that most respondents valued the Japanese language because they equated it with Japanese culture. More notably, former Minister Asō Tarō—known for his nationalist positions—stated in 2005 that Japan was one nation with “one civilisation, one language, one culture, and one race” (Gottlieb, 2011). The advent of globalisation, however, led the Ministry of Education to encourage the use of dialects within communities and the learning of English. This led Japan to identify itself as a “bidialectal society,” characterised by the use of standard Japanese in public spheres and dialects in private contexts (Igarashi, 2018, p. 65). Although translingual practices are increasingly common in contemporary Japanese society (Turnbull, 2020), the absence of legal and constitutional recognition of the Japanese language can be regarded as a legacy of post-war nationalist discourse and, consequently, as an implicit affirmation of Japan’s monolingualism as part of its cultural identity.

In conclusion, the French and Japanese languages are grounded in distinct conceptions of shared identity. This divergence has led to differing roles and perceptions of language within each state; accordingly, the subsequent section will elucidate how these identities are manifested in diplomatic activities.

5. The International Promotion of the French and Japanese Languages

This section presents a more in-depth analysis of the narratives used by France and Japan to promote their respective languages, highlighting disparate ways of legitimising their international policies.

5.1. The Sacralisation of the French Language by French Presidents

Although French language-education initially served as a colonial instrument with the founding of the AF in 1883, it has since evolved into a vast diplomatic network. With 321 million speakers worldwide (Délégation Générale à la Langue Française et aux Langues de France, 2024), French and Francophonie are frequently cited by officials as essential assets in France's diplomacy, and the promotion of the French language was prioritised in Emmanuel Macron's 2018 policy initiative: *Une ambition pour la langue Française et le plurilinguisme* (An ambition for the French language and plurilingualism).

The speeches predominantly revolve around two main themes, which will be explored in greater depth: the promotion of plurilingualism and the role of French as the vector of universal values. However, the Presidents construct their discourse differently and emphasise distinct aspects in pursuit of their respective goals. Jacques Chirac (1995) draws a contrast between the past and the future by referring to the slavery that occurred between the 16th and 19th centuries in the Gulf of Guinea ("le théâtre de l'une des plus grandes tragédies de l'Histoire," in English, "the scene of one of the greatest tragedies in history"), emphasising that the current summit serves as a means of uniting around human values that transcend all boundaries. By contrast, Nicolas Sarkozy structures his argument around foreign policy objectives within the framework of France's presidency of the G20 and G8, outlining his goals for 2011. In this sense, French-speaking countries must collaborate in pursuit of these objectives. François Hollande likewise underscores the importance of promoting multilingualism and the universal values inherent in the French language. Nevertheless, he underscores the geopolitical situation in Africa, especially in light of the numerous political, terrorist, and health-related issues. To that end, Francophonie should advocate for humanity and global solidarity. Ultimately, Emmanuel Macron places youth at the centre of his vision for the years ahead. He describes Francophonie as a "lieu de ressaisissement" (a space for renewal), expressing concern over the "reconquête" of French as a language of mobilisation ("langue de tous les combats"; Macron, 2018).

Regarding the content of the speeches, the first theme that emerged is plurilingualism, which is widely invoked by speakers as a rationale for advocating the French language. Plurilingualism is defined as "stressing the dynamic use of multiple languages/varieties and cultural knowledge, awareness and/or experience in social situations" (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, n.d.). Jacques Chirac previously defended this cause, emphasising the necessity for Francophonie to take the lead in a broad campaign for linguistic pluralism and cultural diversity (1995). Similarly, Sarkozy (2010) affirmed the necessity to safeguard cultural diversity against the threat of monolingualism, declaring "Dans un monde où progresse le risque—car c'est un risque—du monolinguisme, au fond de l'uniformité" (In a world where the risk—because it is a risk—of monolingualism, of uniformity). A continuity is evident in the declarations of Hollande (2014) and Macron (2018), who respectively asserted that "Défendre le français, c'est promouvoir le pluralisme linguistique" (Defending the French language equals defending linguistic pluralism; Hollande, 2014), and "Il n'est pas une langue qui écrase les autres, c'est une langue qui se nourrit des autres" (French

does not crush the other languages, it feeds off them; Macron, 2018). The presidents, therefore, regard the preservation of the French language as a form of resistance to linguistic and cultural homogenisation, as well as a defence of linguistic diversity.

Nevertheless, the mobilisation of plurilingualism is interpreted in two distinct ways. Firstly, it is viewed as a form of competition with English, whose growing dominance is perceived as a form of monolingualism that France opposes in its efforts to safeguard cultural diversity. According to Chirac (1995): “si dans les nouveaux médias, notre langue, nos programmes, nos créations ne sont pas fortement présents, nos futures générations seront économiquement et culturellement marginalisées” (that is, future generations risk cultural marginalisation if French creations and language are not protected). In a similar vein, Macron (2018) asserts that, while English functions as a language for everyday communication, French serves as a language of creation (“Mais l’anglais est devenu une langue d’usage, je dirais de consommation. Notre langue, le français l’est tout autant, mais, c’est aussi une langue de création”).

Secondly, this predominant emphasis on plurilingualism may be interpreted as, on the contrary, an implicit promotion of monolingualism benefitting the French language. The statements contained in the budgetary documents place emphasis on the need to bolster the status of the French language worldwide as both a European and world language, as shown in the 2006, 2013, and 2018 bills: “Renforcer le français comme langue européenne et internationale,” “Renforcement de la langue française à travers le monde,” or “Renforcer la présence et l’attractivité de la langue française” (“reinforcing French as a European and international language,” “reinforcement of the French language across the world,” or “reinforcing the French language’s presence and attractiveness”; Ministère de l’Europe et des Affaires Étrangères, 2006, 2013, 2018).

When examining how the French language is discursively constructed, the second most striking element accompanying plurilingualism is the legitimisation of French through references to Enlightenment values. The presidential statements consistently present the French language as a political ideal. Chirac (1995) mentions solidarity, fraternity, as well as a universal vision. In a similar manner, Sarkozy (2010), Hollande (2014), and Macron (2018) stress the defence of humanism, freedom, equality, and democracy. Political leaders perpetuate the question of national identity by referencing values such as humanism, freedom, democracy, and fraternity. Beyond serving as a tool for work and communication, French is constructed as a political ideal through Enlightenment-rooted cultural and political beliefs that endow French identity with meaning. It reflects French culture and history, embodying values of French identity that are portrayed as universal and contribute to maintaining a humanist order. This focus on universality enables decision-makers to underscore the uniqueness and distinctiveness of France’s identity and language, which are attributed a messianic role in promoting human rights and countering obscurantism.

Despite employing distinct references, the four presidents collectively construct the French language as transcending various divides and exemplifying the principles of freedom, equality, and democracy. They elevate it to a cherished political instrument by mobilising symbols and historical resources, resulting in the sacralisation of the French language as conceptualised by Gentile and Mallett (2000). It refers to the formation of a religious dimension in politics, distinct from traditional religious foundations. This sacralisation occurs when “politics is conceived, lived and represented through myths, rituals and symbols that demand faith in the sacralised secular entity, dedication among the community of believers, enthusiasm for action, a warlike spirit and sacrifice to secure its defence and its triumph” (Gentile & Mallett, 2000, p. 21).

Gentile and Mallett (2000, p. 22) provides four conditions for sacralising an entity. First, the consecration of the primacy of a collective entity—French is depicted as embodying universalist values and serving as a model that all nations may adopt. Second, the incorporation of this conception into a “code of ethical and social commandments” that binds the individual to the entity—Jacques Chirac maintains that advocates of the French language must also promote tolerance and openness towards others. Third, the consideration of its members as an elected community and the perception of political action as a messianic function aiming at fulfilling a mission. François Hollande argues that French-speaking peoples collectively possess the potential to change the world, while Emmanuel Macron underscores the need to confront non-democratic and global challenges. Fourth, the development of “a political liturgy in order to worship the sacralised collective entity by way of an institutionalised cult and figures representing it, and through the mystical and symbolic portrayal of a sacred history” (Gentile & Mallett, 2000)—Jacques Chirac cited Charles de Gaulle as his model, whereas François Hollande highlighted the role of French during decolonisation in facilitating the independence of various peoples.

In this context, in addition to serving as an explicit political tool, the discourses of the elites regarding the French language associate it with France’s national identity and imbue it with a religious dimension. French is regarded not only as a linguistic model but also as a symbol of freedom and human rights that warrants protection. The French language is sacralised through references to historical events and values of universal significance, facilitating extensive outreach. This phenomenon, as will be discussed, is not reflected in the Japanese case.

5.2. Japan: Promoting Nihongo Without Explicit References to National Identity

The teaching of the Japanese language has been integral to the dissemination of Japan’s culture since the 1990s. The Japanese government has prioritised the promotion of both traditional and contemporary cultural elements while advancing language education internationally, particularly through the initiatives of the JF (Gu & Deng, 2024). In 2024, an estimated four million individuals across 143 countries are studying Japanese, including younger generations, due to their interest in pop culture (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2025). The analysis will demonstrate that, in contrast with French, Japanese is not explicitly portrayed as a symbol of national unity but rather as a means of fostering mutual understanding. Nonetheless, this article also argues that Japan’s uniqueness is implicitly conveyed through the sociological concepts of *uchi* and *soto*. Similar to the approach taken with French, it seeks to comprehend the underlying values and assumptions inherent in discourse surrounding the Japanese language. The declarations published on the Ministry’s and JF’s websites are the following:

The Japanese language education overseas plays an important role in deepening the understanding of Japan overseas, cultivating individuals engaged in exchange with Japan and creating bases for friendship with other countries.....More students learn Japanese, because of an interest in Japanese pop-culture, such as anime and manga, or due to a desire to understand a different culture. (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2025)

Increasing familiarity with the Japanese language for people overseas helps to spread affection for and understanding of Japan throughout the world...We also disseminate information about Japanese-Language teaching methods and provide teaching materials, and implement

Japanese-Language tests that measure the Japanese-language proficiency of Japanese language learners. (Japan Foundation, n.d.)

While understanding Japan is already a clear priority, this focus is further reinforced by incorporating statements from the Diplomatic Bluebooks:

Promoting the use of the Japanese language abroad is essential for enhancing the understanding of Japan by young people abroad (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2004, p. 217).

Accordingly, the government of Japan works on public relations overseas to promote understanding [of] Japan and [its] foreign policies among the citizens of foreign countries.....In this regard, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs implements measures to promote Japanese language overseas, introduce pop-culture and other Japanese contemporary culture. (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2010, p. 21)

Promoting Japanese language education overseas helps foster future leaders who will build a bridge between Japan and overseas, deepen understanding towards Japan, and lay a foundation for friendship with other countries. (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2017, p. 328)

Diplomatic missions overseas carry out a range of cultural projects as part of efforts to promote a deeper understanding of Japan and expand the circle of people with a great affinity toward Japan in the areas under their jurisdiction. (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2022, p. 319)

Additionally, the JF's annual reports offer the following declarations:

The Japan Foundation, whose founding mission is to promote mutual understanding between Japan and other cultures and contribute to the development of a peaceful global community, places special emphasis on Japanese language education as a way of making Japanese culture more accessible to people around the world and devoted to promoting all facets of Japanese-language education. (Japan Foundation, 2007, p. 27).

Students of Japanese gain an understanding and appreciation of Japan in addition to knowledge of its language. The Japan Foundation encourages teaching of the Japanese language around the world, and ensures the quality of the education that students receive. (Japan Foundation, 2011, p. 17)

Teaching the Japanese language to people outside Japan helps to increase their interest in and understanding of Japan. (Japan Foundation, 2023, p. 10)

In light of these statements, the concept of “mutual understanding” frequently appears in the government’s legitimization of Japan’s public diplomacy strategies. Although the JF has emphasised the importance of internationalising Japanese to bolster Japan’s global presence, mutual understanding remains the core principle underpinning the promotion of Japanese (Japan Foundation, n.d.). In this context, enhancing international comprehension of Japan constitutes the primary rationale for disseminating Japanese and represents the principal policy concern for diplomatic actors. In this context, two observations emerge: First, this objective has remained consistent over time, and a notable distinction from the French case lies in the

absence of explicit references to Japan's identity. Unlike French presidents, there is no portrayal of the Japanese language as possessing either universal or particular value, nor is it depicted as a political instrument intended to unify people. However (and secondly), this article argues that legitimising the promotion of Japanese through mutual understanding constitutes an implicit acknowledgement of the differences between Japan and other cultures, thereby expressing Japan's distinctiveness. This argument is linked to the second analysis, based on the Japanese versions of the JF's annual reports and brochures. Following an analysis of their statements, several noteworthy elements were brought to light: the JF occasionally refers to "people in other countries," "people overseas," or "people outside Japan." These terms resonate with a central socio-psychological concept in Japanese society: the *uchi/soto* distinction. While *uchi* (内) signifies "in-group," *soto* (外) denotes "out-group," indicating a differentiation between "we" and "they." *Uchi* encompasses family, friends, colleagues, or all sorts of acquaintances, whereas *soto* generally pertains to the external world (Link, 2012). This distinction reflects the Japanese consideration of people and relationships, categorising people as either *uchi* or *soto*. Notably, the JF's declarations in Japanese from 2009 and 2021 use the kanji symbol of *soto* (in bold), for example:

- 海外の人たちに日本語を知ってもらうことは、日本への親しみや理解を世界に 広げることにつながります。
(“Making the Japanese language known to people from other countries will help to spread familiarity and understanding of Japan throughout the world”; Japan Foundation, 2009, p. 18).
- 海外での日本研究を支援することは、深い相互理解へとつながります。(“Supporting Japanese studies abroad leads to deep mutual understanding”; Japan Foundation, 2021).

By associating the principle of “mutual understanding” with the necessity to comprehend and appreciate Japan, particularly emphasising individuals residing outside of Japan, the JF's discourse on language is interpreted as an implicit reaffirmation of Japan's unique identity, which the Japanese language facilitates understanding. From this perspective, the promotion of the Japanese language is not justified by a universal objective; rather, the rhetoric implicitly emphasises differentiation between Japan and other cultures.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

This article examined how France and Japan have mobilised diplomatic narratives relating to their national languages to project national identity since the 1990s. It demonstrated the influence of France and Japan's history and culture on the conduct of their foreign policy through an initial investigation of their domestic policies and by addressing the research question: How do France and Japan instrumentalise language as a tool for projecting national identity?

Based on historical and legal analysis, the findings reveal that the protection of the national language is addressed differently in France and Japan. While both French and Japanese served as instruments of unification during the 19th century, the respective governments have since adopted distinct approaches. French, as the *de jure* national language, benefits from stronger political and institutional protection than Japanese, which functions as a *de facto* language. This distinction underscores a stronger sense of shared identity associated with the French language, as evidenced in the narrative analysis, and results in two key elements: First, the mobilisation of the French language explicitly promotes a universal objective. French Presidents engage in a sacralisation of the language by drawing on various cultural resources—including historical events, figures, and values—to assert its global significance. Conversely, Japan does not sacralise

the Japanese language. Instead, its discourse emphasises the principle of mutual understanding, positioning Japanese as a tool for fostering trust among foreign audiences. However, this article suggests, through the principles of *uchi* and *soto*, that this approach may implicitly reaffirm Japan's distinctiveness. This study thus enriches the existing literature on French and Japanese diplomatic practices by incorporating national identity as an analytical variable. It also suggests that further research may be conducted on both states' promotion of their national language, with a particular focus on the activities of actors such as the AF and the JF.

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Conflict of Interests

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