Several problems concerning language and ageing will be discussed in this paper. In Japan before and just after the Second World War, one could see many children and relatively few old people. Nowadays, however, only a few children and many old people (both healthy and infirm) can be seen. This kind of population change, owing to the decline in the number of children and population ageing, often has notable effects on the language. As language is a major means of transmission of culture, population ageing may eventually ensure transmission of culture between different generations, because periods of contact between young and old generations become longer.

However, population ageing in present-day Japan has already reached a sufficient level for this to happen, so the effect is limited. The “law of diminishing marginal utility” in economics is applicable. Furthermore, two social changes inhibit transmission of culture: first, discontinuation between generations because of the predominance of the nuclear family; and second, the increase of information from the mass-media.

The essence of this paper can be summarized as follows. Population ageing is a phenomenon owing to medical and hygienic improvements, but it is reflected as economic and cultural phenomena in contemporary society; its relation to language is a cultural phenomenon and higher social mechanisms are influential.

2. Language Tradition and Language Change

2.1. Language acquisition throughout a whole lifetime

Let us ascertain the process of language acquisition in order to observe the actual process and mechanism of language change. Language acquisition basically continues throughout one’s whole lifetime, adjusting to the environment. The language acquisition of infants is said to
be overwhelmingly influenced by the mother. There is a critical period for language acquisition and the basis of language, such as phonology, is stabilized by the teens. Later in life, there are influences from family members and peer groups, and at school, there are influences from classmates. As a young adult one adopts the language of the same generation, and also acquires the language of the workplace as a socialized person. Some areas of sociolinguistic competence, such as honorific language, manners and conventions (what to say on occasions such as births, marriages and deaths) are acquired still later in life. Not only knowledge of individual words, but sociolinguistic competence and communicative competence too are acquired outside school. When the mechanism of language acquisition does not work well, acquisition remains incomplete.

However, transmission from the generation above (parents, for example) is ordinarily sufficient, and transmission from two or three generations above (grandparents, for example) is not necessary. As for the transmission of culture among other primates, contact with one generation above is usual. Transmission of culture from two or three generations above while living together seems to be unique to the human species.

2.2. When language changes occur

Considering the processes discussed above, language changes typically appear as errors of acquisition. Discontinuation of transmission is realized as adoption of different word-forms and expressions. The following types, arranged according to life stage, have been actually observed (Inoue 2000).

1. Erroneous acquisition and simplification by analogy among infants.
2. Diffusion among groups of children and playmates (transmission from grandparents will be discussed later).
3. Acquisition of youth language among youth groups.
4. Acquisition as a socialized adult (honorific language and technical words).
5. Acquisition from younger people of youth language in later stages of life.