

A Sociolinguistics Approach to Language and Identity in a Japanese Returnee Student: Case Study and Treatment

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ABSTRACT : This paper will examine the sociolinguistic aspects of language and culture and its relation to identity. We will first begin with a definition of language and culture from a sociolinguistic perspective followed by a thick description of a Japanese classroom and a brief case study on language and identity. Then, a case study presenting the challenges experienced by a Japanese returnee student after reintegrating into the Japanese education system will be analyzed. Finally, a focused literature review with an overview of the sociolinguistic aspects related to bicultural identity raised in the case study and pedagogical applications will also be discussed.

Keywords - bicultural, culture, identity, Japan, sociolinguistics

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper will examine the sociolinguistic aspects of language and culture and its relation to identity. First, a definition of language and culture from a sociolinguistic perspective followed by a thick description of a Japanese classroom and a brief case study on language and identity will be discussed. Then, a case study presenting the challenges experienced by a Japanese returnee student after reintegrating into the Japanese education system will be analyzed. As language acts are a marker of identity so is culture. In a homogenous culture such as Japan, Japanese language and behaviour is a major identifier in being Japanese. Failure to conform to societal norms by asserting one's identity through a host country's language and culture will most likely result in marginalization from the group. Finally, a focused literature review with an overview of the sociolinguistic aspects related to bicultural identity raised in the case study and pedagogical applications will also be raised.

2. View of Language and Culture

Language reveals the many aspects of who we are to those around us. We may exhibit similar racial features but once a sound, a word or phrase is uttered it exposes a part of our identity that we inevitably or deliberately disclose. Coulmas (2005) states that, "a basic tenet of sociolinguistics is that language displays its speakers' identity" or, in other words, "your language gives you away" (p. 171). He perceives that linguistic identity is a social construct, a matter of choice, and as we speak, it tells others "where we grew up, our gender, our station in life, our age, and the group we want to belong to" (p. 173). In unison with Coulmas, Harrison (1998) asserts that, "identity is generated through culture--especially language—and it can invest itself in various meanings: an individual can have an identity as a woman, a Briton, a Black, a Muslim. Herein lies the facility of identity politics: it is dynamic, contested, and complex (p. 248, in Omoniyi, p.11).

Language and culture are significantly tied together. Agar (1994) maintains that language can be learnt through grammar and a dictionary but if people desire to truly communicate, culture must be taken into consideration. He defines culture as something that happens to us personally when we deal with people as “[we] encounter differences, become aware of something in [ourselves], and work to figure out why the differences appeared. Culture is an awareness, a consciousness, one that reveals the hidden self and opens paths to other ways of being” (p. 20). Agar (1994) further elaborates that problems in communication are rooted in who we are such as our encounters with different mentalities, different meanings and different ties between language and consciousness.

If language is an expression of identity—based on who we are; then culture is the manner in which we negotiate meaning. Whichever way we choose to speak, it not only reveals our identity but it also affects whether we allow culture to aid us in better understanding others. Identity affects how we view culture and how we communicate.

3. Thick Description of a Class

The bell rings as 850 Japanese boys and girls aged 13-15 scamper to their respective classes at a public junior high school in a rural town of 100,000 called Kanuma, situated in Tochigi, Japan. It is a hot, humid and muggy afternoon on a Tuesday with temperatures rising to about 32 degrees Celsius. The last period in the day is English right after P.E. class for the 3rd graders. English, for some, is seen as a way to get into high school, university, and eventually a company with a bright future. For others, it is a time for goofing off, gossiping with their friends and catching up on sleep.

Yoshi walks into class approximately 25 feet wide by 40 feet long with about 30-32 desks and chairs arranged in a 6 x 5 grid. There are two entrances, one at the front (entrance 2) and the other at the back (entrance 1) in addition to an emergency exit. Windows are lined to the right and left of the room. The windows to the right of Yoshi’s desk looks out onto the school field. The windows to the left lead out into the school corridor. At the back of the room are approximately 30-32 cubby holes (area 1) for school bags and sports equipment. Between the back entrance and the cubby holes is the cleaning closet (area 2) and behind Yoshi’s desk (Desk 1) is the blackboard (area 3). Another desk (Desk 2) is next to Yoshi’s desk (Desk 1) (see appendix).

Everyone recognizes his face and immediately stops what they are doing. Yoshi steps behind the desk at the front of the room facing the class, puts his hands on his side, straightens his posture and says, “Attention!” in a loud and audible voice. Students quickly respond by setting their desks straight and turning their bodies to face him while sitting at their desks. A student starts the class off with “Good afternoon, Yoshi” with the rest of the class following in unison. After this regular ritual students’ postures relax. Without a word of direction, students begin with their second ritual by opening up their textbooks and start reading aloud for a timed three minutes. Then, they copy down the sentences in their notebooks for another three minutes. This is then followed by grammar translation exercises. “Alright, time’s up,” says Yoshi.

Yoshi views the classroom as a training ground for English with its organized rows of desks facing the blackboard. It is a time to get serious about learning as each minute is measured and not wasted. There is a set structure to each of the two rituals. The first ritual is greeting in which a designated student says “Good morning, Yoshi” and always followed by the whole class. This signifies that Yoshi is a figure of authority and should be respected as everyone must acknowledge his presence. The second ritual is training in which students always start reading aloud, followed by writing exercises immediately after greeting. This automaticity disciplines students to work effectively and efficiently and serves as a form of classroom management. About 30 minutes into the class, the ALT walks in—the assistant to Yoshi and native speaker of English. All students were puzzled as to who she is. She looks just like any other Japanese— black hair, brown eyes and fair

skinned. Yoshi grabs everyone's attention and says, "This is your new English teacher. I'll let her introduce herself." The ALT starts chattering away in English and pulls out a small Canadian flag announcing herself as Canadian. Suddenly, she hears surprised whispers everywhere. "She's from Canada? No way!" "She's just another Japanese" "She's Korean. Annyeong!" "No, she's Chinese. Nihao!" "Gaijin (foreigner)." Immediately, she repeatedly defends herself with "No, I was born in Canada. I'm not Japanese! I'm not Korean!" She goes on to explain that her parents had immigrated from Hong Kong over 20 years ago and that her birthplace was in Vancouver. She speaks perfect English but the students could not differentiate what is considered standard at this stage. What came out of her mouth did not match students' expectations of what should have been heard, which was Japanese. The students stop listening to her and continue to throw their verbal assumptions at her. Frustrated with her mistaken identity she quickly ends her introduction.

The ALT associates language with identity whereas the students associate racial features with identity. She chooses to set herself apart from her students although they have similar racial features. To repeatedly say that she was Canadian and not Japanese or Korean signifies that she values multicultural diversity. She expects others to value her diversity but instead is shocked to discover her students are culturally unaware of the diverse population of Canada. It challenges her to find ways to show others her identification with Canada. Her perfect English does no help to identify her with the home country as no one is sure whether she is pretending to be non-Japanese or not. She is desperate to help the students see beyond the surface and into the deeper level of self that makes up her real identity. The students came across a piece of culture that challenged who they are and they were not able to see culture as a part of language.

The ALT is relieved to learn that the student who has stayed abroad in Canada for a year because of his father's job transfer is in her class today. She can finally have some decent conversation with someone with a higher English language proficiency level. She picks Jun out of the class and excitedly begins to question his experience abroad. All eyes and ears were on him. He speaks a couple of short sentences and looks down at his desk. To the ALT's utter disappointment, Jun decides to play down his level of English. She has heard him speak almost fluent English before but why is he not showing off his true level of competency? Jun believes that expressing a higher level of English to his peers would result in marginalization, especially, in a strong, group-oriented culture like Japan. Individualism is not widely welcomed within the in-group. Jun is afraid of betraying his own identity as Japanese and will refuse to speak English fluently to maintain his "Japaneseness". It is important to maintain group harmony by being like everyone else not only because he is one of the few minority speakers but also bilingualism is not overtly promoted in the school. In addition, Jun needs to take account of hierarchy because he's considered the new guy who didn't need to struggle for 3 years to reach the level of English everyone is at. The new guy is deemed less experienced in the daily operations of the school and must respect those who have more experience and have attended this school longer. From the ALT's point of view, learning is regarded as sharing your experiences with others, expressing your opinions and positioning your identity.

4. Case Study on Language and Identity

Although English is highly promoted as a foreign language in bridging communication between Japanese and foreign companies to fulfill the country's economic purposes and incentives, very few public schools in Japan accommodate to the needs of bicultural children. Yashiro (1992) writes that public schools have not responded to the need of maintaining returnees'(kikokushijo) foreign language ability. Several reasons explain as to why the Japanese education system is unwilling to nurture returnees including a lack of resources in terms of incompetent teachers and budgetary constraints. Over the years, returnees are increasingly receiving more acceptance and prestige as they are recruited by global companies to serve in areas that require intercultural communication (Goodman, 2003). However, more opportunities could be provided to nurture returnees in the Japanese education system.

Japanese returnees are men, women and children who have lived and worked abroad after an extended period of stay. After settling back in Japan, they face readjustment problems including bullying and victimization, identity issues, group and classroom conflicts because they fail to speak and behave like native Japanese (Ford, 2009). They are marginalized as Japanese national and cultural identity is strongly associated with being able to read, write and speak in Japanese. As Kanno (2003) states, “they were deemed deficient in Japanese language proficiency—and deficiency in Japanese language was considered synonymous with deficiency in being Japanese (p.18). Returnees were regarded as misfits who were unwilling or unable to conform to Japanese norms of behaviour and “had been regarded as a ‘problem,’ a walking contradiction who looked Japanese but did not behave Japanese” (Kanno, 2003, p. 18). These norms of behaviour are rooted in a very strong sense of group identity which emphasizes values of harmony and conformity in Japanese society. Jun had just returned to Japan after 3 years of studying in the public education system in Canada. He tries his best to be a part of the group after transferring back to a high school in Japan. However, his western behaviour characterized by his rash outspokenness, opinionated answers and individualistic choices tends to annoy his teachers and threaten his classmates. Next year, everyone will be taking university entrance exams geared towards local Japanese students but he has trouble catching up with reading and writing Japanese. Because of cultural differences and differing linguistic abilities, Jun is marginalized by his peers and has no one to share his overseas experiences with. Eventually, he becomes quiet and isolates himself from his peers. His parents see English playing an important role in Jun’s future career and success so they encourage him to maintain his English abilities. Other returnees that make up five percent of the school population including Jun, are experiencing similar challenges and frustrated by their bicultural identity.

5. Treatment

a. Focused Literature Review

Identity is multiple and multilayered. It is also fluid in which the “individual is able to move in and out of identity categories by varying their acts in response to demands and needs within particular moments of identification” (Kanno, 2003, p. 18). A returnee may act as an individual by choosing to isolate himself from the group and identify with the language and culture of the host country. He could also change his identity by responding to the necessary requirements such as fully conforming to the norm and accepting group values in order to be acknowledged as Japanese. As Kanno (2003) states “group membership is an indispensable part of what shapes our identities, just as much as our desire to be unique, irreplaceable individuals (p. 11).

The returnees’ ability to speak English almost fluently is a means of asserting their identity. Vann, et al (cited in Omoniyi & White, 2006, p. 213) states that “identities are fluid, multi-layered and contradictory, and constructed through linguistic interaction”. Language is a marker of identity which is either accepted or rejected and distinguishes between us and them depending on the situation (Coulmas, 2005). Tabouret-Keller (1996) also states that “language acts are acts of identity” (p.315). When returnees choose to use English among their peers, they construct their identity according to their experiences in the host country. Block asserts that identity is “focusing on the individual as a social being, subject to the influences of the environment within which s/he is located” (cited in Omoniyi & White, 2006, p.3).

The breakdown in communication between a returnee and his peers are not just language related but also related to behaviour that make up culture. Their peers refuse to take culture into consideration by either being unaware or unwilling to accept linguistic differences in a monolithic society. According to Miller (2004), “in the negotiation of identity in multilingual contexts, if you sound alike within the Discourse, you are not seen as different” (p. 310). However, returnees sound different by possessing not only a higher language proficiency level but also exhibit behaviours contrary to the norms of Japanese society. Thus, they are treated with disapproval and become marginalized.

According to Davies (1991), in sociolinguistic identity research four points can be made about identity:

1) Identity change is possible. Although returnees may affiliate themselves with the host country's language and culture, in a monolithic society rooted in a strong sense of group identity it is not an option for them to continue in their current ways. To do so, would only add to their social pressure.

2) Identity change requires effort and is not equally easy in all situations. Because only five percent of the population in a school of 850 are returnees, it is much harder for them to maintain their English abilities as opportunities to practice the language will diminish greatly. In addition, constantly speaking a minority language in the school may not be viewed favorably.

3) Emphasis placed on language as an identity marker is variable. English may be more widely accepted in more cosmopolitan cities like Tokyo where returnees have more opportunities to assert their identity but in a small, rural town like Kanuma speaking Japanese will be the group identity marker.

4) Language-identity link is historically contingent. At certain times in Japan, English was viewed unfavorably and so were returnees. As English grew into an international language returnees were more widely accepted due to the advantages they have in education and employment. Over the years, especially from the mid-1980's, the status of returnees began to improve with the growing number of institutions offering special advantages for returnees (Goodman, 2003).

b. Application

Ford (2009) has suggested several pedagogical implications for returnee students in high school and university. One suggestion is to place students in small returnee-only classes instead of large mixed proficiency classes. These classes allow returnees to reflect on their experiences and issues regarding different cultural perspectives while maintaining their English language fluency and learning. Other suggestions include encouraging returnees to pursue individualized study, such as using self-access centres, collecting their work in individual portfolios and having regular consultations with an instructor.

Parents may have their children attend programs after school or on Saturdays that are especially for returnees. These schools focus on helping returnees integrate back into the Japanese education system, maintain their bicultural fluency and serve as an outlet for them to express their suppressed identity.

Teachers can educate the majority of the school population understand culture and enable them to perceive returnees as part of the group rather than marginalized individuals.

6. Conclusion

Language is a marker of identity where one may choose to identify with a group or separate oneself from the collective. Through a thick description of a class in Japan and a case study focusing on the experience of a returnee, it is shown that language can assert ones' identity depending on the needs and demands of the context. Culture reveals itself in language when differences are encountered but if we desire to interact with those who are unaware and unconscious of these differences communication tends to breakdown.

A focused literature review has illustrated the sociolinguistic aspects raised in the case study. The returnee must express his bicultural identity through speaking English and Japanese to make sense of the cultural differences. His identity is changing, hybrid and fluid adapting to the circumstances that either encourages his identity such as that in the host country or discouraged being in a monolithic, group culture. Applications and suggestions have been made in light of the issues to provide a "treatment" to the marginalization of returnees.

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How to cite this article: *Lydia Leung, A Sociolinguistics Approach to Language and Identity in a Japanese Returnee Student: Case Study and Treatment, Asian. Jour. Social. Scie. Mgmt. Tech. 2021; 3(4): 33-38.*