Conceptualizing Multilingual and Multi-Ethnic "Othering" in Japan

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This paper puts forth the vision of a socio-psychological shift for Postmodern Japan in which the discourse of essentialist homogeneity can be seen as slowly transforming to a discourse of cultural pluralism. Concepts drawn from sources concerned with ethnicity, race, language, and identity are reviewed in order to conceptualize, within the historically and socially situated context of Japan, the construction of the 'multi-ethnic, multi-lingual other.' 'Othering' refers to the hegemonic practice of exclusion by dominant groups of certain outsider or marginal groups from the mainstream. Themes examined in the counter discourses include: the homogeneity myth, 'othering', cultural essentialism, discourses of Japaneseness & Nihonjinron, voices of other discourses of identity, and diversity throughout Japanese history. Although signs of transformation are manifesting, we might ask how long this shift will take and how might it be accomplished? What are the discourses? Who produces them? Who consumes them? How are they distributed?

この論文は、ポスト・モダンの日本にける社会的・心理的変遷に関して、「本質主義的同種性」というディスコースが少づつ「文化的多様性」というディスコースに変化している見通しを進めていることを論じている。民族、民衆、言語、アイデンティティーなどに関する文献から出てくる概念は、日本の歴史的・社会的状況において、「多民族・多言語に関する他人」の社会的構成を概念化することを明らかにするために検討するものである。「他人にする」という言葉の意味は、「人が主流から除外させて、あるアウトサイダーや、限界的なグループが主要なグループの排他的支配的行動のことについて」である。検討しているディスコースの反論に対するテーマは次に示す。日本における同種性の神話を追い払うこと、「他人にする」という概念を分析すること、文化的本質主義を反論すること、日本人と日本人論のディスコースを分析すること、他のアイデンティティー・ディスコースを表明すること、日本の歴史としての多様性を明らかにすることなどである。次のような問題も考えられる。現在の社会的ディスコースは何か。その社会的ディスコースの生産者は誰か。その社会的ディスコースの消費者は誰か。社会的ディスコースはどのように配布されるか。

The purpose of this paper is to examine how multi-lingual and multi-ethnic 'othering' has been conceptualized in Japan over the last several decades in response to historical and social discourses drawn from mostly Japanese-produced literature centering on issues of ethnicity, race, language, and identity. In particular, this paper will examine recently expressed arguments countering dominant discourses in Japan of homogeneity, monolinguality, and monoculturalism in which 'Japaneseness' is framed in the context of "the other." "Othering" is a concept emerging from sociology and cultural studies to explain the hegemonic practice of exclusion by dominant groups of certain outsider or marginal groups from the mainstream. Often questions of personal identity are involved in determining who are others and who are insiders. Within the context of Japan, "the othered" could include not only people outside of the dominant racial and ethnic group, but also people of non-dominant gender, class, religion, and sexual orientation, among other marginalized peoples who are demanding recognition and inclusion in all aspects of social life. As the academic term "the othered" (noun form) or "othering" (verb form) have come into usage recently over the last decade or two, there is not an appropriate single corresponding Japanese equivalent which covers the broader nuance of the English term. In referring to "the othered" as people who are not Japanese, *gaijin* or *gaikokujin* (外人、外国人) is most often used. Other variations for "the other" include *yosomono* (余所者), and for the verb form "othering," *tannin ni suru* (他人にする) is also sometimes used.

Related to "othering," is the message contained in a large body of Japanese literature mostly appearing from the 1980's under the genre known as *Nihonjinron* (literally, theories about the Japanese people). The main *Nihonjinron* discourse, from its emergence, has dealt with explanations of how the Japanese people are unique in the world, to the exclusion of others. *Nihonjinron* has been criticized as expressing an essentialist view in order to explain almost every aspect of social life (Maher & MacDonald, 1995). Following upon several decades of *Nihonjinron* literary publications and tremendous media discussion and attention to this genre of work, social discourses of homogeneity, monolingualism and monoculturalism have come to pervade political, educational and social institutions and practices making these discourses dominant and hegemonic.

Maher and Macdonald posed the challenge, "How to develop a satisfactory theory of social change which explains the transition from a nation which imagines itself to be monolingual, monoethnic, monocultural to a different awareness embracing cultural diversity, a plural society? (1995, p.14).*"* In this paper, through attention to various counter-discourse themes becoming increasingly prevalent in Japan, I would like to take up Maher & Macdonald's (1995) entreaty by considering *a model of socio-psychological change for Postmodern Japan by examining how the discourse of cultural pluralism is presently in the process of replacing the discourse of essentialist homogeneity.*

This transformation entails a paradigm shift from a narrow, static worldview to an enriching, creative, fluid, growing worldview. The questions to be asked are how long will it take to achieve this, and how might this be accomplished? First, though, let us look at arguments and themes framing Japan which have emerged in recent years countering essentialist homogeneity with a view towards cultural pluralism.

Main themes in the counter-discourse

Various themes have appeared repeatedly over the last few decades countering arguments of Nihonjinron. Following is an examination of the main themes.

Dispelling the homogeneity myth

The main overarching theme in the counter discourse of 'othering' is dispelling the myth of homogeneity. Roy Andrew Miller (1982), an Altaic languages linguist and Japanese specialist, was one of the first to critically examine the nature of 'Japan's Modern Myth' by particularly focusing on language. Miller (1982) disputes the claims:

> …that the Japanese language is exceptionally difficult in comparison with all other languages; or that the Japanese language possesses a kind of spirit or soul that sets it apart from all other languages, which do not possess such a spiritual entity; or that the Japanese language is somehow purer, and has been less involved in the course of its history with that normal process of language change and language mixture that has been the common fate of all other known human languages; or that the Japanese language is endowed with a distinctive character or special inner nature that makes it possible for Japanese society to use it for a variety of supralinguistic or non verbal communication not enjoyed by any other society—a variety of communication not possible in societies that can only employ other, ordinary languages (Miller, 1982, p. 11).

Miller lends a satirical humor to his critical approach to unwrapping this myth by homing in on fallacies of the myths and the mythmakers themselves. He has been criticized (for example, Befu, 200l) for his personal attacks. However, having myself attended Miller's lectures at the University of Washington while he was writing this book, I understand his positioning and appreciate his critical approach and humor. If nothing else, Miller should be recognized for producing the first in-depth critical analysis of *Nihonjinron*.

In 1996, Denoon, et. al. made another major challenge to this myth, this time by focusing on multiculturality and diversity. In Denoon's view, Japan has always been multicultural. Denoon and his contributors (1996) examine Japan from its earliest historical reconstructions based on archeology dating back to the Jomon Period. Denoon's contributors also examine Okinawan, Ainu, East Asian, and Japanese cultures to emphasize Japan's history of diverse cultures.

In 1997, Weiner edited a book in the same genre, challenging the myth of homogeneity which he framed within the context of *minority groups* within Japan. He included Ainu, Burakumin (a remnant outcaste group designated during the Edo Period, similar to India's Untouchable Caste), Chinese, Koreans, Okinawans, and the newest group at that time, *Nikkeijin*. The members of *Nikkeijin* include Brazilian and other overseas 'second-generation' Japanese-heritage 'returnees' to Japan, most of whom entered Japan as unskilled laborers, with little or no Japanese language proficiency, creating a new 'underclass'. Weiner writes, "But the social construction of 'Self' in Japan has also presumed its opposite, the excluded 'Other', against whom notions of Japanese homogeneity and purity could be measured (1997, p. xiii.)."

In 200l, Harumi Befu, who since the 1980s has been extensively researching *Nihonjinron*, looked at this phenomenon from an anthropological viewpoint. Befu tried to step out of the mold of Miller (1982) and others by, rather than revealing the falsity of the discourse, examined instead the cultural or national identity expressed in *Nihonjinron*. He traced its origins and compared how this cultural identity anthropologically might manifest itself in other cultures.

Also in 2001, Lie published *Multiethnic Japan* which takes a more contemporary view of Japanese society than Befu's work. Lie, an ethnic Korean born in Korea, who spent his formative years in Japan before immigrating to USA, positions himself as having both an insider and outsider perspective. Lie includes the following ethnic groups in Japan: Ainu, Okinawans, Koreans, Chinese, Japanese and Burakumin. While Maher & McDonald (1996) include Burakumin as an example of *diversity* and Weiner (1997) designates them as a *minority group*, this is the first time I have seen Burakumin referred to as an *ethnic group*. Lie proposes several causes for the growth of the discourse of homogeneity. One of these is the effect of the collapse of the Japanese empire. Lie establishes that this collapse and the relinquishing of colonial control lead to the reduction of the notion of multiethnicity. This, coupled with the rapid economic growth of the 1960's, also increased the discourse of homogeneous nationality. With the increase of foreign unskilled workers coming into Japan, rather than allowing the discourse of multiethnicity to emerge, discourses of Japaneseness came to strengthen the notion of the lower class 'Other' in contrast to the middle class (or classless, homogeneous) Japanese, according to Lie.

In a similar genre, Noguchi & Fotos (2002) challenged the notion of Japan as a monolingual country by revealing the incredibly diverse history of language contact in Japan. Donahue (2002) also contributes to this genre by examining "Japaneseness" as it is enacted though everyday discourse.

Othering

'Othering' is another overarching theme that appears in most of the *Nihonjiron* counter arguments. 'Othering' emerges as the natural antithesis of Japaneseness—the notion of a binary distinction between 'us' and 'them.' Weiner (1997) articulates this, "But the social construction of 'Self' in Japan has also presumed its opposite, the excluded 'Other', against whom notions of Japanese homogeneity and purity could be measured…the intention here is to provide a historically contextualized analysis of 'Otherness' in Japan with reference to its principal minority populations… (1995, p. xiii)."

Cultural essentialism

Another theme expressed in much of the literature challenging *Nihonjinron* is the notion of cultural essentialism. Cultural essentialism is the reduction of social complexities into a very narrow and oversimplified explanation. In Japan, cultural essentialism has been expressed as the view of the world narrowed down into binary categories of "we Japanese" and "the Other." The essentialist view in Japan equates Japaneseness with nationality, language, race, ethnicity, and class. Lie writes, " The belief in a classless society and cultural essentialism is part and parcel of the widespread assumption that Japan is homogeneous, whether in language, cuisine, popular culture, or ethnicity. Being Japanese is a natural and ineffable quality. The equation between the state, nation, and ethnicity (as well as class and culture) means that Japan is a distinctly homogeneous country (2001, p. 45)."

Discourses of Japaneseness and arguments rebutting Nihonjinron

As discourses of Japaneseness are at the essence of *Nihonjinron*, many authors have specifically examined and contested these discourses. Weiner (1997) writes about the social construction of self in Japan. Miller (1980) and Maher & MacDonald (1995) write about how speaking Japanese is thought to entail Japaneseness. Lie (2001) writes, "the discourse of Japaneseness casts 125 million Japanese citizens into an essentialized receptacle of homologous individuals whose primary identity is Japanese. The crucible of the state provides the mold for the enduring form of Japaneseness. By equating class, nation, and ethnicity, Japan emerges a society of mechanical solidarity."… the discourse of Japaneseness opposes insiders against outsiders (p. 50)." Befu (2001) took a different approach in simply looking at Japanese explanations of themselves to themselves from an anthropological point of view.

Allowing for (struggling for) other discourses to be heard: diverse identities

In contesting these various discourses of Japaneseness, cultural essentialism, and homogeneity, many writers have not only sought to point out inconsistencies in the arguments, but many have also struggled for other discourses and marginal voices to be heard (Kano, 2003; McVeigh, 2003; Lee, 2002; Ching, 2001; Lie, 2001; Noguchi & Fotos [Eds.], 2001; Yamamoto, 2001; Douglas & Roberts [Eds], 2000; Maher & Macdonald, 1995 [Eds.]).

Lie (2001) challenges the prevalent idea of Japan as a classless society. Lie also appeals for Japanese to allow discourses of multiethnicity in Japan to replace the discourse of monoethnicity or homogeneity. Maher & Macdonald (1995) push for more discourses of diversity to be heard in Japan, including not only in terms of ethnic or racial diversity, but also diversities among Japanese people such as the deaf, women, Burakumin, and returnees. Lee (2002) appeals for Japanese to accept Koreans as equals in Japan, challenging the dominant Japanese positioning which places Japanese as 'racially' superior and Koreans as inferior to them. She asks Japanese to strive in a real sense towards their expressed goal of internationalization by overcoming basic prejudices. Noguchi & Fotos (2001) struggle for the discourse of a multilingual Japan to be heard which includes not only the inclusion of the indigenous languages of Ainu and Okinawan Ryukuu, but also long established immigrant languages in Japan of Korean and Chinese, and more recently of Brazilian Portuguese, English and others. In understanding the place of these languages in Japan, code switching and language attrition are other issues that Noguchi and Fotos (2001) and their contributors bring to light; most particularly, within their message is a lobby for a more prominent positioning for the discourse of linguistic educational rights for the speakers of these languages.

Historical explanations of Japan: always having been diverse

Another significant theme in this counter-argument is the disputation of the notion of diversity as being a recent aberrant phenomenon. The expressed view is that, in fact, Japan has historically long been: multicultural (Denoon, 1996), multiethnic (Lie, 2001), multi-lingual (Noguchi & Fotos, 2001) and heterogeneous (Weiner, 1997). Diversity, being viewed as a threat to society, is simply denied.

According to Maher & Macdonald (1995), diversity has always existed in Japan, not just in terms of ethnicities, but also in terms of diverse or marginalized groups such as returnees, women, and the deaf. They write, "Difference, disability,

inferiority is our richness, not our weakness…It is in diversity that we find the impetus for creativity, for challenge, for exchange, for sustained life (Maher & Macdonald, 1995, p. 11)." They reveal historically both the occurrence of diversity in Japan and the suppression of it.

Denoon, et al (1996) look at the historical effects of multiculturalism in Japan going back as far as Paleolithic times and taking it up to present day Postmodern Japan. Weiner, *et al* (1997) examine the historical formation of Japan's principal minority groups. Lie (2001) mostly examines examples in modern times from the lead up to WWII to explain cultural nationalism and the myth of monoethnicity to try to dispel it. Lie writes, "The collapse of the empire radically reduced ethnic diversity in Japan. The sudden and complete loss of the empire, and the rapid departure of many colonials from the archipelago, occurred in a country that had become significantly integrated in terms of infrastructure as well as culture. This is the fundamental social context underlying the rise and dominance of monoethnic ideology (2001, 125)."

Conclusion: Will this shift be accomplished soon, and if so, how?

We must ask if the transition model proposed at the beginning of this paper is actually in progress in Japan. Was *Nihojinron* just a phase of Japanese identity growth, paralleling economic growth and is it coming to its natural end along with other obsolete social trends? Are mainstream Japanese ready to accept the notion of heterogeneity and diversity in the near future or is this a vague notion hatched by "outsiders"? How will the struggle for acknowledgment and acceptance from the various diverse segments of society converge and volley for greater

hegemony? How much voice will be given to non-mainstream Japanese citizens or non-Japanese permanent residents? Will the category of 'Japaneseness' begin to change and take on new dimensions, and would it be beneficial to Japan as a nation and cultural entity if the boundaries of 'Japaneseness' were extended? There are certainly many more voices being heard in Japan recently from various national, social, economic and ethnic perspectives.

In writing about this sensitive topic, I realize the importance of looking reflexively my own positioning within this discourse as a permanent foreign resident with a child who is both Japanese and foreigner (in terms of both nationality and ethnicity). As teachers in Japan, I feel that it is particularly important for us to consider how social and individual construction of 'othered' identities can affect learning, including second language learning. Also as parents of multi-ethnic children in Japan, it is important to consider how these social positionings can affect our children's identities, including the effect on the outcome of their language acquisition: binguality, multi-linguality or monolinguality.

Maher and Macdonald write, "what is necessary is both a repositioning of discourse about 'Japan' as well as a definition of the person as a locus of multiple, shifting discourses. Sometimes I am this and sometimes I am that but always I am…[there is] more of a need for an epistemological shift than mere sensitivity to the oppressed (1995, p.5)." I feel that it is important for the individual " othered" in Japan to make their personal struggles part of a broader movement which is implemental in a major paradigmatic shift beginning to appear in Japan.
It is important to examine how average Japanese people

position themselves in today's society. As much as we might hope for change, we must try to objectively view how and where change is occurring through an examination of discursive practices, social discourses and individual rhetoric by considering the following questions: 1. what are the dominant social discourses heard today, 2. by whom are they produced?; 3. by whom are they consumed?, and 4. by what routes are they distributed? Later we might ask these same questions of the marginal social discourses.

While many people voicing marginal social discourses are Japanese nationals, very few seem to be of the mainstream; most are non-Japanese observers of Japan, non-Japanese residents in Japan, Japanese returnees, Japanese multi-ethnic nationals, and so forth. As diversity is ever growing in Japan, various voices can no longer be ignored. Addressing this, the *Mombukagakusho* (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology) has begun to encourage implementation of diversity with its newest educational catchphrase, "*Minna chigatte, minna ga ii*," which roughly translates as "Everyone in their differences are all good." The fact that the *Mombukagakusho* has promoted this concept of diversity within the schools is a tremendous step in the direction of creating a society where plurality is acknowledged and accepted. The only problem with this is that there has been no teacher instruction or educational training in schools as to how to go about implementing this into a realizable practice.

Certainly this process will continue to include social struggle, recognition, debate, contestation, and a (re)constitution of the dominant discourses. Unless diversity comes to be an accepted, encouraged and elevated aspect of society, promoted both within the educational system and through the means of the mass media, Japan may lose its chance to diversify intellectually, spiritually, and educationally as well as economically, politically and socially. My hope for the future is that this endeavor will continue to be a peaceful struggle in which ever more Japanese will come to positively view Japan as a society of plurality and diversity, even if this continues to take generations to accomplish.

Acknowledgements

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