Studying Italian as a heritage language in Tokyo

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For a long time, Japan was considered to have a high degree of ethnolinguistic homogeneity, and since the Meiji reforms, the concept of *kokugo* has played a central role in the construction of Japan's national identity (Gottlieb, 2005; Calvetti, 1999). However, recent works have shown that what had been considered a monolithic realm is *de facto* a constellation of minorities that use a language other than Japanese on a daily basis (for an overview of Japan's linguistic minorities, see Noguchi & Fotos, 2001; Maher & Yashiro, 1995).

One of these minorities consists of children born into *interlingual families*, "families with two or more languages involved" (Yamamoto, 2001: 1), such as international marriages. The dynamics of language in such contexts has been analyzed in depth (Noguchi, 2001; Yamamoto 2001, 2002 among others). However, the majority of the researchers have focussed on the Japanese-English language pair, and studies that explore other language pairs, especially other European languages, are scarce.

This paper is an extract from the author's doctoral dissertation, which consists of an analysis of Japanese-Italian bilingualism in two contexts: Milan and Tokyo. I will outline here the results of my research in Tokyo, examining the linguistic circumstances of children of Italian descent living in Tokyo, who attend an Italian Saturday school, Scuola Italiana Marco Polo.

First, I will provide some demographic data regarding Italians in Tokyo and will describe briefly Scuola Italiana Marco Polo. Then I will comment on the results of a questionnaire survey and describe the school's linguistic background. Finally, I will discuss some considerations about Italian language maintenance in Tokyo.

本稿は、東京在住で、イタリア語を継続言語としてイタリア語のサタデースクールを通う子供たちの言語状況を探るのである。子供たちの家庭内での言語使用をアンケート調査によって調べ、授業内の会話の分析によってサタデースクールでの言語使用を調べるのである。子供たちの継続言語使用率は低く、ミラノ在住の日伊バイリンガルの子供たちを巡る著者の他の研究に比べれば、東京の場合、言語習得・維持が困難であることが示される。その原因としては、低い民族言語学的バイタリティーや親のインプット、そして社会のメインストリームへの同化の圧迫などが考えられる。

Demographic Data

Italian emigration to Japan is a quite recent phenomenon, and is closely linked to Japan's economic growth. The number of Italians registered with the consular registry in 2003 was 1710. Of these, 1281 were registered with the Embassy in Tokyo, while the remainder were registered at the Osaka Consulate (source: Statistic Office, 2004). However, this figure does not count Italians who have not registered with the consular registry, so the number cannot be considered precise. Numerically speaking, there are fewer Italians living in Japan than other nationals, such as Americans, British or Australians, but Italy has the fifth-highest number among European countries of nationals residing in Japan.

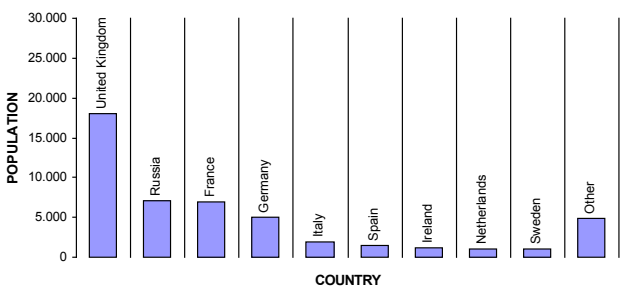

Figure 1. Registered foreign nationals from Europe in 2004 (source: Statistical Training Institute, 2006).

Italy and Japan hold strong cultural and commercial relations: Italians in Japan tend to work in fields such as fashion, design, and the food industry, just to name a few. Their children are usually enrolled in local Japanese schools or in schools where instruction is given in a foreign language (English or French).

Scuola Italiana Marco Polo

There are more than 150 full-time Italian schools worldwide, but none of them are located in Japan or Asia (source: Statistic Office, 2004). Until the Scuola Italiana Marco Polo was recently founded, there was no Italian language support for the children of Italian descent in Japan of any kind. In 2002, a group of parents sought an answer to the growing need within the Italian community to offer children courses of Italian language and culture. Associazione Scuola Italiana Marco Polo (the Marco Polo Association Italian School) was formally founded in July 2002. About 70 families had shown a keen, initial interest in the establishment of an Italian Saturday school. However, only 17 families confirmed their participation and formally joined the association. The Italian Cultural Institute offered the use of its rooms, volunteers took on the responsibility of supervising children's activities before and after the lessons, and the school finally opened in March 2004. The total number of children who joined the lessons in this first term was 19. Due to the low number of students, only two classes were established, and the children were assigned to a classroom according to their age and language proficiency (assessed by the school staff).

According to the teaching advisor, Dr. Desantis, one of the first problems encountered was the heterogeneity of the

classes. On the one hand, there were children who not only lacked any literacy in Italian but even had very low oral proficiency. On the other hand, there were highly proficient children who found the lessons to be boring and inadequate for their language skills. For this reason, when the second term of lessons started in autumn 2004, some of the more fluent students did not renew their participation in the school activities. Other children did join, and by the beginning of November 2004, there were 23-25 (two on a trial basis) children in total, from 21 families. Three classes were established in this autumn term: elementary I, elementary II, and secondary junior, for children between the ages of 6 and 15.

The school's objective was to strengthen both oral and written linguistic skills, along with providing cultural enrichment through elements of Italian history and geography. Teaching materials included an Italian textbook geared to children whose first language is not Italian and other resources prepared by the teachers. The lessons were held on Saturday mornings, divided into two periods of an hour and half each. At the time I visited the school, the Italian Cultural Institute's buildings were being renovated and lessons were being held in a temporary location. Classrooms were plain and equipment was minimal.

According to Dr Desantis, although the school was originally intended for temporary residents, it is mainly attended by permanent residents born to international marriages. Many of the children are not able to read Italian and some do not even have active oral skills. He stated frankly that the main goal for these children was to achieve basic reading skills.

Survey Questionnaire

The author gave the families of the children attending Scuola Italiana Marco Polo a questionnaire, modelled on Yamamoto's (Yamamoto, 2001: 138-153). It was devised to investigate family background (sex, age, native language(s), residential history and so on) and language use (within the family, with peers, at school, etc.). The questionnaires were written in both Italian and Japanese and were distributed by the author and by the teachers. They were collected within 2 weeks.

Twenty questionnaires were distributed and seven were returned (response rate: 35%) relating to a total of 13 children. Due to the small number of families in the sample, it is not possible to generalize the results or to draw a significant statistical conclusion.

Family Background

The questionnaire was completed by the father in three cases out of seven, by the mother in another three cases, and in one case, it was not specified who had responded. Of the seven families, six had two children; only one family had one child.

The average age of the mother was 41.4 years (median: 38), the youngest being 35 and the oldest being 54. The average age of the father was 48 (median 43), the youngest was 42 and the oldest was 59. The average age of children was 7.9 (median: 7), the youngest being 3 and the oldest being 15.

In November 2004, the majority of the children (9 out of 13) had always resided in Japan; two children had moved 4 years before and two children 2 years before.

All the mothers were Japanese nationals and all the fathers were Italian nationals. One father had Argentine citizenship in addition to Italian nationality. All the children had dual nationality, Japanese and Italian.

As for the native languages of the parents, six mothers out of seven were native Japanese speakers (NJS); one mother was deemed to be native Japanese-English bilingual. As expected, the majority of fathers were native Italian speakers (NIS, six out of seven), and one was judged Italian/French bilingual. Therefore, all the seven families in the sample were interlingual families, i.e., the parents were native speakers of different languages.

As for children, 5 out of 13 were judged native speakers of Japanese only, six were considered native Japanese-Italian bilinguals and two were judged native Japanese/English bilinguals.

Language Use

As far as language use between parents was concerned, one family used both Japanese and Italian, two couples used only Italian, one couple used Italian and English, and one used Japanese and English. One family did not provide an answer. Consequently, partial use of Japanese was attested in three parent couples and partial or exclusive use of Italian was found in five families.

When addressing the children, mothers were Japanese oriented (three cases JPN, two cases JPN-ITA, one case JPN/ENG, one N/A), while fathers were Italian oriented: four communicated solely in Italian, two used both Italian and Japanese, one used Japanese and English and one family did not answer. Only two families apply the one person-one language principle, suggested to be one of the most successful strategies in cross-linguistic families (Döpke, 1997). In two families, total bilingual use was attested (JPN-ITA and JPN/ENG) and another two families were found to be partially bilingual (Japanese oriented and Italian oriented).

As regards the children's language, they tended to use Japanese with their mothers: eight children reportedly communicated exclusively in Japanese, one in both Japanese and Italian, and two in Japanese and English. When addressing the fathers, three children spoke solely Italian, six both Japanese and Italian, and two spoke Japanese and English. Sibling interaction tended to shift toward the societal language: six children used only Japanese to communicate with their brother and/or sister, two used Japanese and Italian, and two used Japanese and English.

Code-switching was quite common among parents: one mother and one father declared they frequently switched languages, three mothers and two fathers switched sometimes, one mother and three fathers often did, and two mothers and one father claimed never to switch between languages. As for children, two of them never switched languages, nine did sometimes, one often, and one always.

Other Factors Supporting Italian Language Use

While almost all the children often played with friends who were NJS (11 often and 2 sometimes), only three children had some occasion to play with NIS friends (10 never and 3 sometimes). Opportunities to play with Japanese-

Italian bilingual friends were also scarce (eight never, four sometimes, one often).

Many of the children frequently visited Italy: eight children went to Italy once or more than once a year. One child visited Italy every 2 years and one went every 4 years. Answers were not given for three of the children, and one may assume that they had never been to Italy.

Watching Italian television as a tool to maintain dynamic language skills was reported for two children. Nine children watched Italian videotapes or DVDs and eight children read Italian books.

Discussion

In all the interlingual families surveyed, at least the mother was NJS and at least the father was NIS. No prevailing parental language strategy emerged and when addressing the minority language speaker (i.e., the NIS father) few children spoke exclusively Italian (3 out of 13). By contrast, partial use of the Japanese language was found in eight children. In sibling interaction, the inclination to communicate in Japanese was more dramatic, as only two children used some Italian in combination with Japanese.

Though the sample was too small to draw general comparisons between Japanese children in Italy and Italian children in Japan, it is interesting to note that very few children used only their heritage language to address the NIS, while in Milan about half of the children in interlingual families surveyed used only Japanese with their NJS parent (Ozumi, 2006). This may be attributable to several factors: all but two of the Italian children in the current survey were enrolled in a local Japanese school, so they spent a great deal of their time in a Japanese monolingual environment. Deviations from the mainstream in Japan are scarcely tolerated and children may feel pressured to integrate (Noguchi, 2001; Yamamoto, 2001; Kanno, 2000). Moreover, English retains the highest status as a foreign language in Japan (Yamamoto, 2002) and these children also have to learn English. This may weaken parental motivations for the transmission of the heritage language, as many of them use a nonnative language (English, Japanese) when addressing the children. Since childrearing generally remains the mother's domain, children are likely to spend more time with their NJS mother than with their NIS father. In this way, the children lack sufficient input in the minority language and they lack opportunities to practice. Parent sex seems to be linked to children's bilingual development: at least in the early years, a child seems more likely to be actively bilingual if the minority language speaker is the mother (Noguchi, 2001).

Italian bilingual children in Tokyo have modest language support in the community and have very scarce opportunity to play with other NIS. Italian culture is popular in Japan when it comes to food and fashion, and many Japanese people study Italian as a foreign language, but nonetheless, the Italian community in Tokyo has not established strong community ties and facilities to promote an environment where Italian language skills are maintained. In such a situation, as a Saturday schools' role is vital not only in language maintenance and cultural enrichment, but also in negotiating identity (Kanno, 2003; Nakajima, 1998; Yoshida, 2002; Shibata, 2000), the Scuola Italiana Marco Polo project

is an important step for the establishment of long-term community strategies for bilingualism and biculturalism.

Language Use in the Bilingual Classroom

The author collected a total 12 hours of audio recordings of classroom interaction at Scuola Italiana Marco Polo during November 2004 (2 hours for each class). All the recordings were transcribed and checked by a proficient bilingual.

In bilingualism studies, code-switching (CS) is an issue that has been largely investigated and many theories have been proposed on its communicative value (Auer, 1984; Gumperz, 1982; Myers-Scotton, 1993, among others) and on the grammatical constraints that govern its use (Azuma, 1991; Myers-Scotton, 1993; Poplack, 1980; MacSwan, 1999, among others). It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the controversial issue of CS and borrowing. Any form of language alternation will be considered CS.

At the Marco Polo school, code-switching occurred very frequently at both intersentential and intrasentential level:

> **1) TEACHER**: Allora se vedi uno spettacolo che ti interessa in modo particolare, lo diciamo in un altro modo. Se c'è un programma che ti piace proprio tanto, quando finisci di vederlo, quando avete finito di vedere il programma, che cosa succede? Non pensi di approfondire le tue conoscenze in proposito. *Motto motto shiritai, sono puroguramu ni tsuite, soretomo dareka to hanashite imasuka.*
> "So, when you see a show that really interests you, let's say it in another way. If there's a program that you really like, when you finish watching it, when you finish watching the program, what happens? Don't you think you want to deepen your knowledge about it? *You want to know more about that program, or you talk with someone*?"
>
> **2) TEACHER**: *Tatoeba ano ano* lezione *mo aru-shi*, compiti *mo aru-shi*.
>
> "*For example, uh, well, there is* lesson *and also* homework."
>
> (Italian/*Japanese*)

Use of the Japanese language is the accepted norm among the children, and Italian is used only in school activities such as reading and writing and at the teacher's request. However, even in such cases, children often rely on CS as a device to solve lexical gaps, which can be real or momentary.

> **1) TEACHER**: Cos'é?
> "What is it?"
> **CHILD**: *Mado ka.*
> "*A window*."
> **TEACHER**: Toh, come si dice in italiano?
> "Well, how do you say it in Italian?"
> **CHILD**: La finestra.
> "The window."

Language use in the Marco Polo School is very similar to the usage described by Usui (1997) in a heritage language school in Hawaii, where the minority language was used primarily in reading and writing activities. By contrast, at Milano Hoshujugyoko (a Japanese Saturday school based in Milan), monolingual use is a standard respected by teachers and students alike, and according to the teachers, use of the majority language is limited for the most part to break time.

In Milan, the school policy is to use the Japanese language only and both teachers and students respect this rule, creating a monolingual context in which deviations (i.e., inappropriate language choices) are not only noticed, but sometimes stigmatized. By contrast, at the Scuola Italiana Marco Polo, children often rely on CS to make communication smoother and teachers also make wide use of CS for the functions listed in Guthrie (1984): translations, clarifications, giving directions, concept checking, and identification.

Conclusions

Language maintenance among the members of a community is related to the ethnolinguistic vitality of that language in the host society (Giles, Bourhis & Taylor, 1977): status, demographic, and institutional support. Status means the socio-economic status of the speakers, but also the status of the language: heritage language speakers who have a relatively high socio-economic status and speak a language that is highly regarded are more likely to retain their language. Demography regards not only the number of speakers of a minority language, but also their geographical distribution: if numerous speakers are concentrated in one area, a language shift to the societal language is less likely to happen, as in many Chinatowns. Finally, institutional support consists in the use of the heritage language in mass media, religious organizations, and, above all, education.

Ethnolinguistic vitality for the Italian community in Tokyo is not favourable: although the Italian language is highly regarded, social pressure to assimilate to the mainstream language is strong. Demography also plays a negative role, as there are few speakers of Italian and children have very few opportunities to play with other Italian-speaking peers. Moreover, the Italian community in Tokyo did not develop strong community ties and facilities to promote Italian language skills until recently, when Scuola Italiana Marco Polo was founded. However, the school did not succeed in incorporating the whole community, and ceased its activity as a free association of parents in 2005. (Since then, the Italian Cultural Institutes has begun to offer courses in Italian language for children of Italian ancestry in Tokyo).

Parental behaviour also plays a key role in promoting active bilingualism (Noguchi, 2001; Yamamoto, 2001). Although the language skills of the children involved in this study vary, a stronger effort by the NIS parent when addressing the child seems to be crucial to giving their children the opportunity to develop their heritage language.

Parental efforts to transmit the heritage language and the combination of external factors and inner motivations are vital for the children in maintaining their language skills. It is understood that bilingualism is not a spontaneous achievement, but the result of a complex process involving parents, communities, and educators.

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