

“English makes me act in a different way”: To what extent can a change of language affect speech and behaviour?

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oral history, gender, code-switching, migration, identity

Previous studies have shown that bilingual Japanese give different responses to questions depending on the language spoken. Whilst carrying out a qualitative research project studying the lives and experiences of Japanese women in England, I noticed how a change of language prompted modifications in the speech and behavioural patterns of my interviewees. This paper investigates how this affected the data I collected for my research.

バイリンガルの日本人は、使用する言語が異なると、同じ質問に対しても異なる応答をすることが、先行研究で明らかになっている。イギリス在住の日本人女性の生活や経験に関する質的な調査研究の際、インタビューに応えた女性たちの話し方及び行動パターンは使用言語によって変化していた。本論では、使用言語の違いが、インタビューで収集したデータにどのような影響を与えたかを検証する。

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In a 1960s study, Ervin-Tripp (1964) asked bilingual Japanese women the same question on alternate days in Japanese and English. Receiving different answers, Ervin-Tripp went on to surmise that in code-switching the women were utilizing different “mental channels.” Gudykunst and Nishida (1994, p. 55) noted that this, “clearly indicates that different approaches to the world emerge when Japanese bilinguals think in Japanese and English.” Subsequent studies by Ervin-Tripp and others on second language acquisition and bilingualism and their effects on emotional expression and identities (see for example, Grosjean, 1982; Wierzbicka, 1985; Pavlenko and Blackledge, 2004; Pavlenko, 2006) including language and identity in Japan (Henser, 2000; Gottlieb, 2005) consider to what extent language and culture are inseparable. For my doctorate in oral history and migration, I spent three years carrying out a qualitative research project examining the lives of Japanese women who live long-term in England (Burton, 2003; 2006). I interviewed in English, in Japanese and often a mixture of the two (whichever the women preferred). I had prepared no specific questions about linguistic issues but the subject came up naturally when the women discussed their cultural experiences, and I became increasingly aware that the women often switched languages mid-interview or when the topic of con-

versation changed. I am a social historian not a sociolinguist and, in order to trust my data, I had to consider whether the use of these different “mental channels” and “approaches” affected their answers to my questions.

Oral history as academic research relies on the interviewing of a representative sample of participants in order to understand the experiences of those whom written history may otherwise neglect. History, it is said, is written by the winners, but utilising oral history as a modern research tool is proving important in such cases where a written account may be unreliable or lacking, such as in cases of discrimination, social exclusion or in times of social upheaval such as mass migration or war. What separates oral history research from journalistic interviewing is the fundamental necessity to consider and understand all the possible factors that could affect the methodology of an oral history interview. Sociolinguistic attributes of the participants can affect their behaviour and the answers they may give. These may include issues of: gender, age, and race of the interlocutors and their roles relative to one another; historiographical issues such as the time and place of the interview; whether an interpreter or family members (a hidden audience) are present; how many years have passed since a recalled event took place; and who was involved in the event. For my study of Japanese women's lives in England, I had to consider a further factor, the language or languages used as well as occurrences of code-switching between the two. I had to understand whether and to what extent the women's choice of language prompted changes in their behaviour and in their answers, and if so, how this affected the quality and significance of the data I collected.

Language and Behavioural Changes

Since the years of the bubble economy, the word *kokusaiika* or internationalization has been a key component of the Japanese Ministry of Education's curriculum for studying English (Habu, 2000; Kobayashi, 2007). Yet, running concurrently with this government policy is the socio-political discourse that Japan is a monolingual nation, that it is perfectly acceptable after six years of compulsory English-language education to say, “I'm sorry I don't speak English”. A common

criticism of the failure of most Japanese to reach a competent level of English is the mind-set or attitude towards a foreign tongue, particularly in terms of a threat to national identity, for example, in a Daily Yomiuri article that reassures its readers “Learning correct English no threat to identity” (Benson, 1998). However studies have suggested (Grosjean, 1982; Wierzbicka, 1985, 1992) that bilinguals do indeed feel like different people when speaking different languages or as Wierzbicka notes, they may experience a “double life” through language. What did my interviewees have to say on this issue?

Many stated that immediate changes in attitude and behaviour were triggered simply by their arrival in England. For example, when Mitsuko Sato (all interviewees' names are pseudonyms) came to England she said, “I felt much freer.” Naomi Yamamoto noted that after quitting her job in Japan, she got on a plane to Europe and “then I felt kind of liberated.” This suggests that the new cultural environment encouraged changes in behaviour before they had even opened their mouths.

I think I felt like I was liberated because finally I made this decision and then I didn't have to behave in a certain way so to speak. Because there's a social norm, well maybe I feel this too strong than other people, but I feel like I cannot breathe deeply in Japan and I feel like I have to behave in a very certain way especially because I am female or then I have to behave in a certain limit and don't go derailing ... (Naomi Yamamoto)

Central to this freedom is the utilisation of English.

I think partly the language, English, makes me act in a different way, yeah, act more freely and say what I like to say because English itself is much more direct than Japanese language so it's difficult to kind of hide my opinion with English while in Japanese it's much easier to be vague and ambivalent about things [laughing]. Yeah, so partly because language affects how you behave and what you say. (Naomi Yamamoto)

Changes in behaviour and speech relating to gender, and social pressure to conform to

gendered behavioural norms were particularly often cited, as below.

In Japan, especially when I was [in my] first marriage, I should not speak my opinion, just follow my [Japanese] ex-husband's parents and my ex-husband. And I should not say my opinion and I should not allow to give me pleasure. It's never thought about those things. But here people think about people's happiness and pleasure. That's a big difference and also I can speak free. (Sachiko Adams)

In Japan, if I talk with an elderly man, if the elderly man is a very traditional Japanese man, I have to be careful because if he says, "This is black" [pointing to something white] I have to say, "Maybe." (Sachiko Adams)

When I asked Sachiko Adams if she would have agreed to an interview if I had been Japanese she replied:

Yes, but we have to speak Japanese. If I have to talk to a Japanese woman in Japanese, different, because some kinds of things at the back of my brain like have to be modest all the time and have to be polite, so those things are part of my education So English speaking is good for me to express my real, natural thinking. (Sachiko Adams)

So she freely admitted that she would certainly have phrased her answers differently in Japanese and English. In English she could express her "real natural thinking". But what did she mean and why did she need English to do this? Joy Hendry notes:

[English is] evidently associated with an informal level of communication, perhaps influenced by the idea that Westerners, typically Americans, are supposed to be frank with each other. (Hendry, 1993, p. 143)

The women's changes in behaviour and speech were triggered not solely, or necessarily, by changes in thought but also by conformity to the socio-cultural practices of each language. In Japanese they were bound particularly by rules of gender and hierarchy and were compelled to behave and speak accordingly. When choosing the English language, they could discard such

rules but they then took on the cultural and linguistic practices of their host country, or what they as Japanese perceived those practices to be, speaking more informally with "real natural thinking." In fact, in time they came to realise that English people do not speak so freely and do utilise *honne* and *tatemae*. Even simple greetings needed to be reassessed.

I don't know if it's more to do with culture or with language, they are anyway inseparable, but one thing that struck me was the way you [English people] say "how are you?" and when someone asks me "how are you?" I would stop and try to answer the question but people sometimes walk away without waiting for my answer. And people here generally don't say negative things, don't give negative answers to "how are you" whereas in Japan people would say "oh, I'm tired, I'm knackered, I'm depressed". That's probably one of the common replies. (Atsumi Mori)

In England, "How are you?" is a greeting, not necessarily a genuine enquiry. We do not want to hear details of others' misfortunes, which may be embarrassing. Except amongst family or close friends our replies will always be upbeat. The interviewees had to learn this English cultural rule. Whereas in Japan:

In Japanese society I don't think they are so protective about themselves. They can say they are weak but here [in England] I think people don't really want to say they are weak either because they don't think they are weak or because they just don't want people to know unless they are very close to them. And also in Japanese society it's probably a good thing if you show somebody that you have some weak points, like you can sympathise. If you think somebody's perfect you can't really speak to them. Like, for example, if you drink alcohol in Japan they make a fool of themselves and that's a way of communication in a way, by showing that you aren't perfect. (Atsumi Mori)

Speaking English, I was told by several interviewees, is like wearing a mask at a masked ball, not for the purpose of concealing your identity but to give you the freedom to be *more* yourself, to express sides of your personality that must

generally remain hidden within your native culture. Kelsky (2001) and Bailey (2006) discuss the *atarashii jibun*, the “new self” that can be accessed through the English language.

“So which one’s my true self?”

However, not all behavioural and linguistic changes were so positively or freely adopted. Henser’s study of Japanese/English bilinguals demonstrated that his subjects were aware of behavioural changes accompanying a switch between languages including “greater consciousness of relative social positions when using Japanese and a feeling of lack of reserve when using English—expressed either in increased friendliness or increased aggressiveness” (Henser, 2000, p. 18). Certainly there was a great awareness amongst my interviewees that a change of language and country triggered behavioural changes, with many feeling pressure to adopt such changes simply in order to ensure social survival. Especially for those Japanese women who began living in England as children or young women, competent utilisation of the English language accompanied by the appropriate behaviour meant the difference between social acceptance or remaining alienated from the host society.

It was a big worry whether I fitted in or not, or whether I was saying the right thing or what people thought of me I remember being really tense as a child and I wouldn’t go to the toilet at school. Sounds silly but I didn’t want to go to the toilet in case I lost my friends and I couldn’t find them in the playground. I was *that* tense. (Sayuri Kawakami)

I had to make friends because I didn’t want to be left alone in that [English] school. And for a [teenage] girl, not having friends is devastating to your social status, I mean, it’s unthinkable that you’re not included in the circle so I’d do anything, I’d do anything to attract people or even to sometimes flirt with men. I didn’t care less. (Rie Inoue)

For some, the response to this was to actively manipulate the British stereotypical view of Japanese women to their advantage.

I didn’t know that English people would have this kind of image of Japanese but I could kind of sense it that it was being accepted; me being sweet, me being cheerful was instantly associated with one of their favourite ideal that they have of Japanese girls and I suppose I kind of sensed it, without thinking consciously, and taking it on as a part of my identity and since then I haven’t really divested it. It probably stuck as a part of my identity Well, you can easily be critical of it as a feminist, “You shouldn’t be sweet” but no, I think that’s one way of manoeuvring through life, isn’t it. (Rie Inoue)

Wardhaugh notes, “Your language choices are part of the social identity you claim for yourself” (2002, p. 95). The negotiation between cultural and linguistic rules of language which encourage greater linguistic freedom while at the same time compelling behavioural changes to gain social acceptance have a great impact on one’s ever-changing sense of identity. In some cases this led to a certain amount of identity confusion, a confusion which manifested itself through the use of language.

You start thinking, “So which one’s my true self? A Japanese self that speaks in Japanese language or the one that speaks in English?” (Rie Inoue)

I always think that I should be finding my true self but it’s difficult because we’re always conditioned by what we have around us so it’s always difficult to do that but especially in England. (Rie Inoue)

The discourse of bilingualism and identity is ongoing and active, dealing as it does with notions of self-perception versus identity and the “performance of language”. For the purpose of my research the above quotations alerted me to the fact that interviewees may have been framing their answers according to the language they were using and the culture they were living in. Like Ervin-Tripp’s study, I realized that I may have been getting one answer in English in England as an English woman which I would not have got in Japanese in Japan as a Japanese woman or man. But far from perpetuating a deception, using language to lie or to express

schizophrenic behaviour as critics would have it, the women were simply utilizing language in order to "manoeuvre through life".

Conclusion

Ervin-Tripp's study raised the linguistic question of whether bilinguals think in language-specific mind-sets. When I asked the interviewees about this, they answered that they were not consciously thinking in a different way but were adapting to the cultural and linguistic rules of what is acceptable or unacceptable to say in the home and host cultures. One may therefore give a "cultural response" in one language which may differ from one's response in another. And both responses would be true but only in the language in which they were spoken. It therefore has to be acknowledged that what the women said to me in English might indeed have been different from what they would have said to a Japanese interviewer in Japanese.

Through my oral history study I came to understand how the cultural and linguistic practices unique to every language affect what you say and how you behave. An acceptable response in one language may be confusing or downright rude in another. The skilful speaker must adapt their cultural response together with their choice of language to the host culture. It is the interlocutor therefore who will affect the response.

Gudykunst and Nishida (1994, p. 39) note that, "our culture influences how we use language and our language usage influences how we view our culture. Our language also influences how we look at the world and at the people in our culture". When Japanese women live long-term in England they encounter and must adapt to a new language and culture. The strength of cross-cultural interviewing is that it can help to represent this Third Culture experience. In other words, the linguistic and cultural medium in which the interviews took place was itself a clue to their migration experiences.

Now I come to think of it, it's really interesting the way language plays the part of conditioning your performance in life. (Rie Inoue)

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