

## Study on the Identity of Japanese Returnees

### Introduction

Since America forced Japan to open its doors to trade in 1854, there has been a shift in Japan's role in the international community. Japanese companies began to extend branches to foreign markets in the 1970s, and by the end of the bubble economy in 1993, Japanese overseas investment stood at over \$US 422 billion, with 37,000 Japanese executives managing these companies abroad (*Japan Times*, Tsuji, 1995). With this, 50,842 school-aged children were taken along, marking a 24% increase from 1987. This movement changed the way in which children of Japanese expatriates, or returnees, are viewed. Kanno (2000) argued that in the past, returnees were regarded as "someone who is a strange mix of East and West, Japanese on the outside and a foreigner on the inside, who speaks better English than Japanese". Yamamoto (2001), however, conducted a survey on attitudes toward bilingualism in Japan, which found that of the total 607 responses recorded, 362 (59.6%) were rated as positive, 179 (29.5%) as neutral, and only 66 (10.9%) as negative. Noguchi (2001) argued that as overseas living

became more common, foreign language education gained importance—signified by the emergence of Japan’s first English immersion program, Katoh Gakuen, in 1992. It is seemingly presumed that the acquisition of foreign languages, especially that of English became more and more sought after, returnees would begin to be accepted in what was once perceived as a linguistic monolith.

Yet contrary to what these studies have suggested, the situation that returnees find themselves in is a precarious one, in which they experience difficulty adjusting to either the host country or home country, and in some cases both. This was said to be affected by factors such as the age at which the returnee learned the L2 (Taura, 2005, pp. 153-154), the level of education that the returnee received (Skutnabb-Kangas, 1995, p. 50), and the nature of the community that the returnee lived in (Shibata, 2000). Kanno (2000) argued that returnees often find difficulty identifying with society of both the host and home country, due to systems that segregate returnees from the rest of the community—including ESL in the host country and admission especially for returnees in the home country—and returnee’s tendency to “sit on the bilingual fence” (Dalley, cited in Kanno, p. 377), avoiding integration into either society. In fact, according to

Butler and Hakuta (2004), language acquisition is to be considered an “acculturation process” in which the bilingual develops a unique culture and identity (p. 132).

Pavlenko (2006) further suggested, based on web questionnaire responses, that bi- and multilinguals frequently perceive themselves as different when switching between languages, claiming that some bi- and multilinguals, when switching from one language to another, also switch persona. The present study focuses on exploring the dual identity of returnees.

## **Methodology**

The information for this study was collected through narrative inquiry. Clearly, this methodology—consisting of an analysis of people’s experiences as they are retold—is highly dependent on an individual’s assessment of experiences, but contrarily, anecdotal evidence is especially significant in the present study because the topic of interest has to do with identity, which is as highly emotional as it is cognitive.

There were two participants in this study—Sho and Sachiko (pseudonyms are used to protect their identities). Sho was born in Japan but spent the prominent part of

his childhood and adolescent years in New York, and received his elementary, middle, and high school education in the public school system there. He was 18 years old at the time of the study and was enrolled in an undergrad program at a private university in the Tokyo metropolitan area.

Sachiko was also born in Japan and received her elementary and middle school education in Southern California. A graduate of a private university in the Tokyo metropolitan area, she was 24 years old and worked for a major consulting firm at the time of the study.

The information was collected through a series of interviews and exchange of e-mail. Sho communicated to me mainly in English, only making switches to Japanese when he was using a distinctly Japanese word. Sachiko spoke mostly in Japanese, only using English to elaborate and clarify points.

## **Findings**

### *Overview*

Sho moved from Japan to the United States at the age of 6, without ever

experiencing schools in Japan. Upon entering the 1<sup>st</sup> grade, he was enrolled in the ESL program, but was admitted leave in less than a year. He barely remembered having trouble communicating in English, but according to his parents, his English progressed remarkably in the first few months of living in the United States. The fact that he associated himself mainly with monolingual English speakers—other Japanese students at his school tended to stay in tight cliques—may have been a contributing factor. In addition to Japanese and English, Sho speaks “good” Spanish (having studied it for 7 years), and knows basic Chinese and Korean. He recognized his own talent for learning languages, saying that because languages have always come naturally to him, he never had difficulties retaining his Japanese while living abroad or learning additional languages in school.

Sachiko’s family moved to the United States when she was 7, and she transferred into the second grade at a local elementary school. She acquired English at an early stage, and caught up on the school curriculum in a matter of months. Sachiko had a gift for writing, and in addition to participating in the advanced English program at her middle school she was on the honor roll for three consecutive years.

*Dual identity*

Giampapa (2004) observed a dual identity existent in Tania, a 27-year old Italian Canadian woman whose father and mother are first generation and 1.5 generation Italian Canadians. With her self-identified languages being Standard Italian, English, and minimal knowledge of French and Spanish, she responded:

*...I think in English, I am insufferably aware of the way that the English language manifests itself. While I also react that way to other languages, English is what I write in—and writing, for me, is where I express myself most succinctly and completely. I am also preoccupied with the relationship between English and the other language—Italian most notably, I think, because it was passed down from my parents. I guess I don't feel akin to the concerns of Italian citizens—I think it's because I don't feel that way about any other place but Canada... I feel more North American—newer, less settled, still defining. I believe that has to do with being Canadian ultimately.*

We can infer that Tania's image of herself as a Canadian has less to do with ethnicity and birthplace, but more with her self-image and also her dominant language, English.

Similar findings of a dual identity were found in the present study. Although it was not an issue to switch between English and Japanese, Sho felt that he had two different personalities when speaking them. When asked about the common stereotype of a bilingual being more eager to express thoughts and emotions when speaking English while being more reserved when speaking Japanese, he admitted to falling under the stereotype perfectly. He said that this was not only habitual but that it also occurred because he was under the impression that something that is acceptable in English could easily be taken as arrogance or boast when said in Japanese. This idea is the reason for the rift between his taking the initiative in English conversations and his general uneasiness in Japanese. Sho's difference in outward attitudes was easily recognizable when he exhibited code switching in our interviews.

In Sachiko's case, she had spent a considerable number of years in Japan in contrary to Sho, and her aptitude in Japanese exceeded her aptitude in English after having spent her high school and college years in Japan, yet she was certain that her

behavior became more awkward when speaking Japanese. She claimed she felt “childish and immature” in Japanese no matter how much vocabulary she attained. In relation, she mentioned that when she was a university student, she made excessively detailed notes when making presentations in Japanese but still felt nervousness and a lack of confidence, whereas in English, she could make a speech confidently with a mere outline.

Interestingly enough, both Sachiko and Sho denied having different identities in languages other than Japanese and English. Sachiko, who started taking French in middle school and continued her studies in university, claimed that whenever she spoke French, her mind had to go through the strenuous task of translating her English thoughts into French, and that no difference in identity existed. Sho, who acquired Spanish after having studied it consecutively since middle school, claimed to be able to speak relatively fluently, but also noted that the identity did not differ from his English one. Two conclusions can be made of this. The first is that languages acquired in a later part of one’s life do not obtain an identity of its own. The second is that when languages are acquired in a non-immersion environment (in Sho’s case, a Spanish class in an



American public school where lessons and conversations were mainly in English), an identity does not form as distinctly. It can be inferred that the degree to which the returnee experienced immersion in the host country—whether they were thrown into a situation where they were forced to speak English or they were placed in ESL classes where they were essentially isolated from majority language speaking students—affects whether the returnee develops a dual identity.

### *Self-image*

The issue of self-image arose a number of times during the study of Sho and Sachiko. Other studies too have previously shown that the dual identity often observed in bilinguals leads to a failure to precisely identify oneself. Mills (2004) conducted a study on two Pakistani-British women, one of whom acknowledged two key aspects of British citizenship, legal status and English language, but at the same time, found her appearance as signaling her Pakistani heritage, which therefore excluded her from being “truly British”. The disjuncture between her legal status and her inability to precisely identify her identity is similar to the struggles of returnees. The other informant had

resolved a similar situation coherently:

*"When I go back other people say to me, 'Oh, you're a white person' because of the way I behave, when I come over here people say to me, 'Oh, you're like a Pakistani person' because I'm floating, I'm not fitting into either. It's only now that I'm deciding you know it doesn't matter for me to fit in anywhere it's who I am and I can go around but I think I've only come to that decision because I've had the choice of both or experience of both cultures" (p. 172)*

In this way, the informant overcame the conflict between her two identities, not by adhering to either of the identities, but by “floating” between the two. She has resolved her internal conflict, not by choosing one identity and rejecting the other, but by “sitting on the fence” and defining herself as possessing both identities.

There is a common notion that returnees face a sense marginalization either in their home country or host country because of their lack of proficiency in a language.

The present study found that the notion is partly false and that the sense of

marginalization is a result of the returnee's inability to define herself rather than the level of fluency in the languages.

Even with his English skills so high that he could pass AP-level English with flying colors, Sho claimed that his perception of himself as Japanese “did not just go away” and that during his extended stay in the United States, there was never a day when he did not feel apart from his peers because of it. He often felt there was a disparity between his appearance and his “real” identity; he spoke native English and he had the mindset and values of an American, but his physical features kept him from pursuing his identity. It is clear that even with balanced bilingualism, Sho felt out of place in both his home and host country.

Sho did not escape this sense of marginalization and loss of identity upon moving back to Japan. Living in Japan for the first time in thirteen years, he was astonished by the differences in cultures and accepted behavior from the United States. Because he had a completely different background from most of his peers, he said it was like he was “just a foreigner masked with a Japanese face.” He could understand the language, and yet, he felt that he could not relate to Japanese values. Although he

did not yet experience attrition in his English, he was aware that his friends in the United States who went to the top-ranked universities in the United States were further developing their English, while he was only taking one English lesson a week. “I know that because I graduated high school [in the United States], my English is a better situation compared to other *kikokushijo*,” said Sho. “But there’s this unshakable feeling that in 4 or 5 years, I won’t be able to communicate on the same level as some of my friends who will graduate college in the States.” Moreover, Sho’s concern of his identity not being “whole” even kept him from having a positive self-esteem and led to mental unstableness.

Contrarily, Sachiko had a similar experience to the latter of Mills’ Pakistani-British informants. Having different identities in the two languages was only natural, she claimed, because she felt that each language was linked to the respective culture and her own experiences.

The most significant factor that affected Sho’s and Sachiko’s differences in self-perception is the educational environment. Whereas Sho’s first experience at a Japanese school was in college, where individuals’ concerns were not addressed,

Sachiko attended a private high school in which around 4 out of 10 students were returnees and bilingualism was highly valued. Clearly, this difference in learning environments can be said to affect the informants' self-images.

Bartlett (2007) examined, through the observation of a Spanish-speaking student at a high school in America and her acquisition of English, that the L2 student's identity formation is shaped through the school's bilingual literacy practices, the "opportunity narrative" (p. 28), and the relationships between students, teachers, and administrators. Similarly, Kanno (2008) introduced Zhonghua Chinese Ethnic School, a Chinese immersion school in Japan, where the goal is the "preservation of the Chinese language, culture, and identity." (p. 61) in children who will perhaps spend their entire lives outside of China. She argued that if the students at Zhonghua had been attending a Japanese monolingual school, they would most likely have been labeled as Chinese and "their language deficiency, rather than their bilingualism, would be highlighted" whereas at Zhonghua, Chinese-speaking children were given the spotlight. Bartlett's and Kanno's findings are significant to my assertion that the educational environment influences the returnee's self-image.

## **Conclusion**

The present study shows that the returnee's bilingualism often leads to a dual identity, resulting in a struggle with self-image and a sense of marginalization from both societies. Furthermore, the education environment can be said to be a major factor in determining the returnee's self-image, reinforcing Kanno's (2000) assertion that the current educational systems in the host and home country do not support the returnee's integration into society.

Wei (2007) claimed, "Some bilingual children may find it difficult to cope with the school curriculum in either language for a short period of time. However, these are challenges that bilingual people have to face" (p. 21). As much as it is true that returnees have many advantages of being a bilingual, it is difficult in the present situation of academic institutions and society as a whole for returnees to reap the benefits of being bilingual.

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