

「日本におけるインターナショナル家族の五つの事例
—家庭内でどのように英語が維持されているのか」—

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Five Portraits of International Families in Japan
- How English is Preserved in the Home -

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要 旨

世界全体のグローバル化とともに国際結婚率が上昇する中、家庭内で複数の言語を話す家族の数も増加傾向にある。国際結婚が発生している多くの国において、英語は少数派言語である。本研究では、日本人と婚姻関係にある英語のネイティブスピーカーの家族5世帯を対象に、それぞれの家庭内における子供の英語力維持の方法についてインタビュー調査を行った。これらのインタビュー調査が、特異な社会言語的環境への洞察に寄与することを期待する。また本論文では、日本では少数言語である英語を継承語の従来との定義と比較対照した。結果、日本の国際家庭における英語は、時には継承語と同様に機能することが示唆された。同時に、このような国際家庭は社会的にも重要であることから、支援の必要性にも言及している。

International marriages are becoming increasingly common in the rapidly globalizing, modern world (Constable, 2005). With the frequent movement of people across borders, a growing number of families are living with more than one language in the home (Houwer, 1999). The children of these families, growing up in these transnational environments, could be considered future carriers of an emerging global culture. As such, a study of the strategies that international families use to maintain the minority languages of their children can be meaningful to the field of sociolinguistics.

While language maintenance occurs across most cultures and societies in the modern world, each cultural environment gives rise to unique situations. Language maintenance among Westerners married to Japanese in Japan certainly provides unique opportunities and challenges for the families involved. Children of these families must balance growing up in Japanese society, being Japanese, but at the same time being connected to another culture.

This paper presents interviews conducted with five Western parents living in Japan, married to Japanese and raising children in Japan. In all cases the children were born in Japan and

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their Japanese language abilities were developing naturally. If old enough to attend school, they were enrolled in Japanese public schools. All of the interviewed parents categorized themselves as native English speakers and they were queried following a questionnaire (see Appendix) about the strategies they have been using to maintain English with their children. They were also encouraged to speak freely about any challenges they have faced in this process. Interviews were conducted in person, recorded and later transcribed. No attempts were made to assess the effectiveness of each individual's strategies nor were any suggestions made to the parents regarding their approach. It is hoped that the candid presentation of the highlights of each of these interviews will provide insight into this unique sociolinguistic environment.

Interview #1: Joel

Joel, a French Canadian male, teaches at elementary school and has lived in Japan for thirteen years. He has three sons, Noah, age nine, Lucas, age five, and Louis, age two. Joel speaks with his wife in English and Japanese. He speaks with his older two sons in English and his youngest son in French. He spoke French for the first two years with all three of his children. Regarding the switch to English, he responded:

Well it started out with Noah. Until he was two I only spoke to him in French. And at the age of two he was getting ready to start preschool and we were debating whether or not to send him to a school with English being taught. And we were also moving houses and we got cable TV. Until then we didn't have cable so we bought the Disney channel and stuff like that so, at that point, English kind of took over and it became the language he used when he talked to me. If there had been a French channel we would have probably kept French a bit longer... I want them to have some French. It will make it easier if they ever want to

learn French. I want them to at least have something. It's a goal of mine to have them bilingual but if possible, even trilingual.

He considers their mother tongue to be Japanese. The children usually speak Japanese with each other and his wife speaks only Japanese with the children. Regarding this decision for his wife to speak Japanese with the children, he said:

We've talked about this at length. I have encouraged her to speak Japanese. I don't want them speaking Japanese like me so, if possible, I want them to learn Japanese from their mother. Similarly I want them to learn English from a native speaker so I want them to learn English from me.

Regarding specific strategies that he uses with the children, their books, toys and games are always in English. Joel also reads them an English story most nights of the week before bed. Television has played an important role, as well:

Probably the best thing that's kept their English at such a high level without me being there is the Disney Channel. It's native speed. It's natural English. They've sur-

prised me a few times with the vocabulary and naturalness of speech.

The children attend or will attend Japanese public school and seldom have a chance to use English outside of the home. Regarding any challenges with his oldest son's integration at school, Joel responded:

He's quite popular in school and has a lot of friends. He's never been ostracized because he's not Japanese or anything. He had one friend who came over last year who had some bad words to say about foreigners and we asked him not to have that friend over anymore. Since then, Noah has become more respectful of foreigners. He has a more global view now.

Joel hopes to send his oldest son on a homestay to Canada. He has also considered starting up free English lessons for the kids in the community with the intention that his sons would join in. He feels they are progressing well with speaking and listening but has some concern about the development of their reading and writing skills. He still hopes to eventually have his sons speak French, as well.

Interview #2: Kevin

Kevin is a Canadian male who has lived in Japan for twenty-one years. He has been married nineteen years and has two sons, ages fifteen and thirteen, and a daughter, age eleven. He owns and manages an English conversation school and, regarding language strategies he has used with his children, he responded:

Basically I've spoke only English with them.

My wife spoke English with the children, each child, until they were about two years old and then switched to Japanese. She didn't want to relate to her children in her second language. We've basically followed the "one parent, one language" strategy.

After the first son started speaking English I was so happy I thought I'd done it. Then my second son started having trouble and one of my teachers asked me if I was doing anything different. I suddenly thought, "I am!" What I've changed is I'm speaking Japanese with my wife because I want to improve my Japanese. It occurred to me that it is very important for the children to hear the husband and wife speaking in English. They've got to hear it in the household. So I switched back and my son's English improved. Now with my daughter, too, I only use English with my wife. It hasn't been good for my Japanese though...

Kevin considers his children's mother tongue to be Japanese. The children speak to their father in English and speak to their mother in Japanese. They usually speak to each other in Japanese, however they often role-play in English based on TV shows they have watched. The fact that Kevin owns his own English school has also given his children a unique opportunity to use English:

I own my own English school and we have a classroom right in my home so my children study English twice a week with an American teacher. It's been quite an international environment. We have lots of teachers come right into our home and talk with the kids.

In addition to having his children take English lessons at his school, Kevin has tried working on an English website with his two sons. However, they dropped the project after a while as the sons became extremely busy with junior and senior high school exams.

When asked about any communities outside of the home and school that might give the children opportunities to speak English, Kevin said, "As we live in the countryside, it was difficult to find a community of English speaking children around the same age and after a while I kind of gave up." Finding other children for his kids to communicate with remains a strong hope of his, though, and he commented, "I'd love it if they had some foreign friends around their age that spoke English."

Interview #3: Erin

Erin, an American female, has lived in Japan for eleven years and been married for six years. She currently works as a conversational English teacher and has a daughter, Sophie, age two. When asked what she considered her daughter's mother tongue to be, she replied, "Probably English but she's also really good in Japanese so they're probably even, I guess. She also has been going to daycare since she was six weeks old and they use Japanese there."

Regarding what language she uses with her daughter, she said, "With me it's mixed. Some things are just easier to say in Japanese than English. Mostly we speak in English." Her husband also uses both English and Japa-

nese with Sophie though tends to use Japanese more. Erin normally speaks English with her husband and when they go out as a family they usually speak English together.

When asked if there were other people outside the family who Sophie could speak English with, Erin said, "Not really. I mean, sometimes when my foreign friends come by. And once a week we see Grandma and Grandpa on Skype. But other than that, no."

Erin commented that she was really enjoying watching her daughter's English develop and felt that Sophie was developing a natural sense for language:

Most of her books are in English. She is just obsessed with the ABCs. She could write her name in English before she was not even 2. I was raised Jewish so like the beginning of December was Honokaa and so I was teaching her the Hebrew prayers and she just loved that. She's interested in languages for sure. I think she's just got an ear, you know. Maybe that's part of being bilingual; you really develop an ear for those differences.

Erin hopes to eventually take Sophie to visit America and at some point would like to send her to an English summer camp. As for what will be the best for Sophie's English development, Erin said, "Is it enough to just speak it at home or will more be required? I don't know. But we'll see what happens, you know? When you have a two year old, you really take it day by day!"

Interview #4: Aaron

Aaron is from Australia and works in con-

sulting. He has lived in Japan for seven years and been married for six years. He has two sons, ages five and four. Regarding what he considers the mother tongue of his children to be, he responded, “Japanese. No shadow of a doubt about that!” He further went on to explain the language dynamic at home:

Initially, I studied Japanese myself, and worked pretty hard at it. I didn’t go back to Australia for three years. To be honest, I didn’t really care so much. We live in Japan, their grandparents are Japanese, my wife’s English isn’t that strong, I’m kind of going with the flow. When in Rome do as the Romans, is one saying that comes to mind. Basically, I’m living in Japan, I have a Japanese wife, a Japanese family and so even though sometimes I feel I want to go home and English is important, well, what’s so great about English? It’s just a language. Japanese is a language. English is a language. Why can’t they learn Japanese? That’s my way of looking at it. I learned Japanese as well, and at home we all communicate in Japanese, about 90% of the time.

Aaron works in Tokyo and has a long commute to work so it’s usually on the weekends that he is able to spend the most time with this family. He said, “I spend a lot of time with them on the weekends. But, as a family, we usually speak Japanese. It has to be a very special effort for me to actually say things to them to get them to learn any English.”

As his first son has gotten older, he has noticed him becoming more interested in En-

glish:

He’s starting to realize that English is important and that he is a bit special. People would say to him “You’re Japanese is good and he would just respond with a look like, “What are you speaking to me like that for? I’m Japanese!”

Aaron expects that eventually, he and his family will return permanently to Australia and, as the boys get older he is considering different ways to help them with English. He researched local English classes and decided that rather than send his kids to English class, he could just sit down with them and teach them himself. “I am confident that as a second language, English is going to come naturally,” he said. Regarding his children’s English ability, he further stated:

I don’t know if it is something I’ve neglected so much as though, you know, they’re little kids! The most important thing for them is to have fun. As much as they can ride bikes and go to the park and play with people and feel like they’re having a good time, then mission accomplished. As long as they’re doing that, I don’t care if it is in English or Japanese. When it comes to education and studying really hard that will come. Don’t start them too early, you know. But my oldest son is almost 6, and now things are starting to change. He’s gonna realize he’s different. I think now it’s really time to take it up a notch.

Interview #5: Kirsten

Kirsten, a female Canadian, who teaches English, French, and German, has lived in Ja-

pan for eleven years. She has two children, Heidi, age 7, and Oliver, age 5. Speaking about the language environment at home, she said:

I speak only English with them. My husband also speaks only English with them. Up until recently the kids only spoke English with each other. But recently Heidi has started to speak Japanese with her brother. It's kind of like a role-play they do. It's like, when they speak Japanese, they're two different kids and I'm seeing those kids more and more often.

She further said:

We made a conscious decision this will be an English household. We also made sure we got English babysitters. I'm a language teacher, I know it's really important for those early years to be really strong and after that, whatever happens, they will always be able to go back to their base. In the beginning I got a lot of flack from the in-laws. They really believed that the kids could not speak Japanese. And now they are so impressed by the kids being able to speak both English and Japanese. It's a lot of work, though. It has to be a conscious effort, I think.

Kirsten regularly gives her children homework to do in English along with all their other schoolwork. She has noticed though, that as the volume of schoolwork increases, it is harder for her to find the time to make them do English homework. She reads stories with them in English as well as plays games with them and watches videos. She said, "I'm not a big TV watcher but I gotta say, it's been

great for their vocabulary. I mean, they go back to Canada and they blend right in." She has also started teaching them how to use the home computer to access instructional websites for children.

She regularly tried to get together and do activities with other parents with bilingual children but commented that as the children have gotten older, it has been harder and harder for the parents to find the time to get together. Furthermore, she mentioned that recently when she and her friends have tried to get the children together, they sometimes just end up speaking Japanese. For the most part, the only opportunity her children have to use English, now, is at home.

As they progress in school, sometimes bilingual children in Japan become reluctant to speak their non-Japanese language and become embarrassed about their multicultural heritage. Regarding this phenomenon, she commented:

This is who they are. They have to accept their identity. I mean I can imagine that happening but there's no way I'll cave into that! I mean that's just denying your family and I don't care how embarrassing it is. That's just life and it's nothing to be embarrassed about anyways so you had better start dealing with it, I'd say.

Discussion

Heritage language maintenance has traditionally referred to languages other than English (Valdes, 2005). The concept has been that of the preserving of a minority language that is somehow devalued within an environ-

ment where English is the major language (Montrul, 2008). In this type of situation, children are seen as having to learn English in order to participate in mainstream Western society.

The situations depicted in the previous interviews vary from the classical definition of heritage language maintenance but bear many similarities. In all cases presented, the children have naturally acquired Japanese and are assimilating well into Japanese society. In all but one case, Japanese was considered to be the children's mother tongue. It is interesting to notice that in this environment, English has become a kind of minority language. It is not that the children must learn English to participate in society, rather English has, in a matter of speaking, become a kind of heritage language for them. Indeed, the very definitions of heritage language and heritage language learners are subject to debate (Carreira, 2004; Van Deusen-Scholl, 2003) and situations like the ones looked at in this paper suggest much broader concepts should perhaps be considered.

One difference with English as a minority language in Japan is that Japanese society values English as an important language for Japanese citizens, as can be seen from much of the recent educational reform. There is a growing awareness of English as a global language and, as such, speakers of English are held in high regard. There is, perhaps, more value given by Japanese society to English than is the case with classic minority languages.

From the interviews, there seems to be lit-

tle outside the home in terms of English support for the children. There is a lack of ethnic community that is often associated with heritage language learners. Even so, parents have been able to find ways for their children to connect with English through the media. The availability of English TV shows, movies, and websites provides children with a unique way to preserve and develop their English abilities in Japan.

These environments where English is becoming a language spoken at home while there is a more dominant language spoken in society are becoming more and more common throughout the world, particularly in Asia. As international families become more prominent, national and local governments of the respective countries will be faced with decisions regarding educational support for these families. As countries embrace their new global identities, they will, hopefully, come to see English speakers as a valuable asset to their national strength and, hopefully, will invest in these assets accordingly. The children in these interviews are, after all, Japanese nationals. Most of them will grow up to become active citizens in Japanese society.

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Are there any English speaking communities outside the home that you and your children are involved with?

What hope do you have for the future of your children's language development?

If you have children in school, how has the integration been?

Can you please share some of your reflections on being an English speaking parent in Japan?

Appendix - Questionnaire for Interviewees

How long have you lived in Japan?

How long have you been married?

What are the ages of your children?

What is your nationality?

What do you consider your children's mother tongue to be?

What languages do you and your spouse use with the children and with each other?

What strategies have you used or are you using to teach your children English?