

A Problem of Identity

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Japan is still a predominantly monolingual nation with very little concern for the well-being and education of bilingual Japanese or the non-Japanese speaking population living in the country. In this paper, I will discuss the problem of a bilingual's identity from the point of view of linguistic proficiency, using the results of several studies conducted on Japanese.

Personal Experience

I went to the United States at the age of seven, moved to Canada at the age of nine, and finally returned to Japan at the age of thirteen. At the time, there were no ESL or bilingual programs in New York, nor was there a Japanese weekend school. When I returned to Japan, the word *kikokushijo* (returnee) had not yet been invented.

When I first went to New York, I understood no English, and when I returned to Japan six years later, I had forgotten most of my Japanese. I could hardly even write my name in hiragana--let alone in kanji . In the United States and Canada, I did two and a half years of second grade, a half year of third grade, skipped fifth grade; and, back in Japan, I had to do second-year junior high school twice (not much else you could do when you were ranked number one from the bottom, with a one-in-a-hundred chance of getting into senior high school).

The Problem of Identity

Like so many children who have lived abroad, especially during their formative years, I had problems with my identity--was I Japanese or Canadian or American? One of the biggest factors that made me wonder about my identity was my linguistic ability. My Japanese was at the level of a first or second grade elementary school student. What I lacked was not only the knowledge of the language, but also the knowledge of the meanings of almost all of the proverbial and idiomatic expressions that Japanese children learn in elementary school. I did not have the cultural background necessary for understanding Japanese. At the same time, not having lived in the US or Canada as a teenager, not only was my English beginning to get rusty, but I could no longer keep up with the lifestyle and ways of thinking of teenagers my own age living in Canada.

Who was I? Where did I belong? I had great friends in high school. They never ostracized me or made a fool of me because of my grades or my Japanese. The culprit was in me. I felt incomplete, I felt inferior. It took me a long time to understand and accept the idea that a bilingual is not a person

who has two monolingual or monocultural identities in one, but a person who has a unique identity, which is not the same linguistically or culturally as that of a monolingual or monocultural person of either culture, but has its basis in both languages and cultures.

Research on Japanese Bilinguals

Research on the so-called "returnees" revealed through word association tests that the Japanese-English bilinguals' associative patterns differed both from those of monolingual Japanese and from monolingual English speakers as well (Yoshida, 1985, 1990). Furthermore, the results of the Perceived Social Distance Questionnaire (Acton, 1979) showed that the closer the bilinguals' word association results were to those of monolingual English speakers, the more affectively distant they felt, implying that cognitive or linguistic adaptation does not necessarily entail affective adaptation.

Tatsumi's (1998) research showed that bilingual Japanese used grammatical structures which showed influences from both Japanese and English. For example, even when describing an event in Japanese, they used more modifiers to describe the trajectory of action verbs than Japanese monolinguals, thus implying that their cognitive processes involved in viewing the world were not necessarily the same as those of the monolingual Japanese, even when Japanese is the common medium of expression).

Furthermore, Nemoto's (1986) research showed that the returnees' use of Japanese honorifics differed significantly from that of monolingual Japanese, implying that the bilinguals' perceptions of human relationships differs from those of the monolinguals.

Discussion and Conclusion

Returnees and children of immigrants, for the most part, are children who were thrown into a foreign linguistic and cultural environment, not by choice, but because of inevitable circumstances arising from family situations. Although I was able to overcome my difficulties with the help of my optimistic parents, I also had conscientious teachers and understanding friends who accepted me for who I was. Not all returnees or foreigners are as fortunate.

Educators, parents, and educational policy makers need to have a better understanding of the fact that a bilingual is not simply a person who is partly a member of one linguistic group and partly a member of another, but a unique person with an identity of his or her own.

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