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Japanese-English Child Bilingualism : An Examination of Japanese Community Support

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1 Introduction

The support of the local community is a critical factor in the success or failure of child bilingualism (Romaine 1995: 187). The position of the Japanese community can, at best, be described as ambiguous. Whether or not ambiguity has a negative influence on bilingual families is difficult to determine, but many minority-language parents in Japan do feel disturbed by the superficiality of the support for the bilingualism cause. Cynically stated, the most persuasive argument for child bilingualism in the eyes of Japanese society may be the one for monetary gain, and this alone is cause for concern. This paper begins with brief explanations of the contemporary view of bilingualism and one person/one language, a popular method of child bilingualism. Then community support for Japanese-English bilingualism in Japan is examined in light of the generally positive image of English in Japan, commercial interests, and internationalization.

1.1 The Bilingualism Choice

For parents who choose to raise a child with two languages, the potential advantages are numerous, but the burden on the family can also be great, leading many parents to stop using the minority language (De Houwer 1996: 222). Thus, the method of child bilingual development that each family chooses is of extreme importance. A rigorous but impractical plan of action could lead to the complete abandonment of bilingualism, while a more relaxed strategy might only result in passive bilingualism.

The "graduate" of a successful child bilingualism program enjoys some or all of the following advantages: the ability to understand two cultures; increased job opportunities; a close relationship with the minority-language parent; and intellectual flexibility. However, many parents (and, consequently, their children) give up on bilingualism because they feel that the process itself creates linguistic, cultural, and domestic divisions within the family (Noguchi 1996: 245).

1.1.2 The Applicability of One Person/One Language

There are several ways of raising one's children to become bilingual and the question of which method is best is, perhaps, unanswerable. An examination of current thinking (see Baker 2000; Genesee 2000; De Houwer 1996; Huss 2001) reveals that the one person/one language method is the favorite of researchers and linguists, yet there are questions about the method's applicability to the Japanese situation. Many parents insist that the method is unwieldy and does not take into account family needs. In theory, one person/one language is the simplest and most natural choice for parents who speak different mother tongues, since it only requires each parent to speak his/her native language to the child. In reality, this method necessitates a great commitment from the minority-language parent and it is unrealistic for many working parents.

1.1.3 One Person/One Language

The great advantage of the one person/one language method of child bilingualism is that it simplifies the bilingualism process for small children while clarifying the roles of the parents. In the one person/one language paradigm, each parent possesses a different native language, with some understanding of their partner's language. One parent's native language is

the dominant language in the community, and the parents speak to the child from birth in their own languages (Romaine 1995: 184). The one person/one language theory of bilingualism—otherwise known as the Rule of Grammont—has been widely accepted as a successful means of raising children bilingually (Genesee 2000: 335). The person who is credited with inventing this method, Jules Ronjat, a Frenchman married to a German, followed his son's linguistic development for the first five years of life and published the results in 1913. Ronjat's most significant discoveries were that his son developed a heightened sensitivity to both French and German along with keen translation skills (Edwards 1995: 61). One person/one language is also known as simultaneous bilingualism (Elliot 1985: 174) or elitist bilingualism (Dopke 1992: 1)—the latter tag a reference to the fact that many of the method's adherents have been language teachers, or educated members of the upper-middle class.

1.1.4 The Advantages of One Person/One Language

Traditionally this policy "has been hailed as the best method for ensuring problem-free ... bilingual development" (De Houwer 1996: 225). The logic behind one person/one language states that if each parent speaks only one language, without any mixing, the children will learn to distinguish between lexical codes more quickly than they would if their parents mix codes. Numerous case-studies suggest that children raised according to this bilingualism policy learn to keep the two languages separate and to avoid code-switching (Baker 2000: 40). Genesee cautiously promotes the method as "commonly advocated, although not well-documented" as "the best way to avoid bilingual mixing in children" (2000: 335). The method greatly simplifies bilingual learning for young children. In addition to helping children distinguish between languages, the method puts infants "in a

position to start associating certain sounds with certain speakers" (De Houwer 1996: 234). A further advantage of one person/one language is that it forces children to use the minority language communicatively.

1.1.5 The Changing Definition of Bilingualism

Definitions of bilingualism have been broadened primarily due to the realization that bilingualism is not a fixed state. As a result, the popularity of one person/one language may be in decline, since it is no longer considered necessary to master the minority language to qualify as bilingual. Few linguists insist on a restrictive bilingualism definition any more because it is to the benefit of researchers to admit a wide range of subjects for academic study. Zhang, for example, has gone so far as to claim that "the soaring craze for and popularity of English" in Shanghai has created a community of English-speakers with a level high enough to be termed bilinguals (2000: 53). Zhang would encounter little opposition from Dopke (1992: 4), who referred to bilingualism simply as the "acquisition of two languages." De Jong (1986: 13) echoes this sentiment, calling bilingualism "a process rather than a state," because the bilingual individual is constantly learning new expressions in the minority language while struggling to maintain native-like control in the majority language.

1.2 The Positive Image of English

While English is now taught at the elementary school level across Japan and native English-speakers enjoy prestige within Japanese society, the positive image of the English language does not necessarily make it easier for native English-speakers to raise bilingual children. English is everywhere in Japanese society. English words and phrases are used in advertisements, songs, and all forms of popular culture for their value as a "design"

that is largely devoid of meaning. "In Japan, English has a social clout which ... is underpinned by neither knowledge nor grammaticality" (Edwards 1995: 77). An examination of three issues—business English, internationalization, and returnees—will show that there is little active support for bilingualism in the Japanese community. On the contrary, warnings to proponents of bilingualism are contained in the ambivalence of Japanese society towards the English language.

1.3 English: The Language of Business

In Japanese junior- and senior-high schools, students of English learn that, in order to pass university entrance examinations, grammatical accuracy is far more important than communicative competence. English has traditionally been "seen as a key to international economic competition" (Cave 2001: 173) and not as a means of communicating. Although the focus of English education in Japan is said to be shifting from grammar to communication (Matsumoto 2001: 13), the primary reason for studying English remains the same: the potential for financial gain.

1.3.1 The English Language and Money

An educator from Tokai University, Matsumoto, stresses the connection between English and economics: "Japanese students have to realize that if they are able to communicate in English, they'll have lots of fun in the future. And sometimes maybe they can make money out of being able to use English as a means of communication" (Matsumoto 2001: 12). He cites the Japanese soccer player Hidetoshi Nakata, who is active in Italy, as a role model for children studying foreign languages, because Nakata has learned enough Italian to be able to answer questions at press conferences. "Serious soccer players think that studying a foreign language is important

to become an international player. Being able to use foreign languages is no longer merely fashionable" (Matsumoto 2001: 15). Matsumoto does not provide any clue as to how teachers might motivate students to study a foreign language when those students have no aspirations to become professional athletes or to engage in international business. Japanese-English families may pursue bilingualism in part out of the conviction that bilingual children enjoy a wider range of employment opportunities, but this is unlikely to be the main reason for teaching English to one's own pre-school children. The immediate goal for all minority language parents is likely to be natural communication with one's children in one's mother tongue.

1.4 The True Meaning of Internationalization

Hagiwara has claimed that the Japanese use of the term "internationalization" has been widely misunderstood to mean opening Japan to the outside world. Rather, the term has implied Japanese people

> ... learning foreign languages and their traveling overseas to bring back the knowledge and skills of other countries for use in Japan. The idea of welcoming foreigners to Japan to study or to work in Japanese was not included in this concept. This is why the Japanese have been so tardy in acting to facilitate the smooth acceptance of foreigners into Japanese society. (Hagiwara 1990: 163)

In a study of foreign students conducted by Keio University from 1975 to 1985 it was discovered that many foreigners become less comfortable with Japanese society and attitudes as their stay in Japan lengthens. Hagiwara reports that some students "feel that they are regarded not as fellow human beings worth getting to know, but as objects of curiosity to be

stared at, pointed at, and talked about, or as tools for practicing English conversation" (1990: 161). Many of the foreign students expressed dissatisfaction with the prevailing misconception that Japanese culture and language can never be truly understood by foreigners. Survey participants regularly commented that "Japanese prefer foreigners who can't speak Japanese well" or that Japanese "feel uncomfortable about foreigners who speak Japanese fluently" (Hagiwara 1990: 162). Thus, while talk of the "internationalization" of Japan might appear to make it easier for minority language parents to adapt to the country, the Keio survey suggests otherwise.

1.4.1 Discrimination Against Returnees

The term "returnee," or "kikoku shijo," was first used by the Japanese Ministry of Education to refer to children who have spent over a year abroad. In 1999, there were 49,670 Japanese children attending elementary and junior high schools abroad. Roughly forty percent of those children were studying in North America (Shikano 1999: 16). The term "returnee" was only supposed to be applicable for the child's first three years back in Japan, during the child's period of re-adjustment to society (Shikano 1999: 16). But the misapplication of the term has come to symbolize Japanese society's refusal to accept those who deviate from the norm. There is a strong perception that returnees are hindered, rather than enriched, by their experiences abroad. The difficulties encountered by many returnees show that bilingualism is not always considered an asset in Japan. The website "Shijo-Tsushin" was established to provide returnees with a forum for self-expression. Non-Japanese visitors to the website may be surprised to learn that discrimination against returnees is taken for granted. Witness the title of one submission by Kimi Ohkawa: "Returnees may be Poorly Accepted in

the Japanese Society but So are the Handicapped" (Ohkawa 1998: 1).

1.4.2 The Danger of Labelling

An anonymous contributor to Shijo-Tsushin summarizes the frustration Japanese bilinguals feel over the misapplication of the term, "returnee":

It has been a while since the publicly coined term "kikokushijo" somehow became a norm itself. I am fed up with the phenomenon of calling someone kikokushijo although the person has not returned (kikoku) to Japan in the first place and has passed the age of shijo (boys and girls) long time ago [sic]. Such a labeling precisely represents the narrow mindedness of the Japanese society, which cannot keep up with the flows of the people and activities in the global era. (Koizumi 2000: 1)

Much of the on-line discussion deals with the difficulty of defining an international person—an issue of great importance to Japanese who have lived abroad for an extended period and find themselves considered something other than Japanese. Through her study of returnees, Shikano was surprised to discover the vast number of participants who felt that their identity had been destroyed by re-entry into Japanese society (1999: 20). Some contributors to Shijo-Tsushin confess to feeling "embarrassed to call themselves Japanese, because they feel so different after living in a foreign environment for so long" (Kohri 1998: 3).

1.4.3 Returnees Struggle to Blend In

Many returnees confronted with an identity crisis choose to hide their language skills and cultural experiences. Among the children who had studied in English-speaking countries, Shikano discovered many "hidden

returnees," or students who deliberately mask their language ability by speaking Japanese English (1999: 17). In another recent study of Japanese returnees' language behavior, Takeuchi et al. found that most returnees feel compelled to readjust to Japanese communication styles:

> Japanese society tends to view returnees' behaviors and communications styles acquired from their overseas experiences negatively. As a relatively homogeneous, group-oriented society, Japan is intolerant of aberration and difference. Returnees, therefore, are under pressure to act as other Japanese and often try hard to assimilate. (2001: 317)

Many returnees do not flaunt their experiences and skills at all, but go to the opposite extreme: "to fit back into the collectivistic Japanese society, they suppress their expressiveness and follow stereotypic Japanese cultural norms" (Takeuchi et. al. 2001: 325).

1.5 The Importance of Motivation

For bilingual families, there is a valuable lesson to be learned from the case of returnees, the issue of internationalization, and the link between English and money. The lesson is not, however, to despair over what may appear to be Japanese society's superficial, or hypocritical, approach to the English language. Rather, bilingual families must create the motivation for their children to learn English and use it productively. As Fishman noted almost forty years ago in his discussion of diglossia, individuals, not societies, become bilingual (cited in Hornby 1977: 6). Diglossia is understood to mean the use of two or more languages differentially in a single geographic region. Often a distinction is made between high and low varieties or languages. Two languages are not necessary to fulfill one communicative

purpose, thus societies where "widespread bilingualism exists will tend to move toward diglossia" (cited in Hornby 1977: 7). Therefore, the relationship between the minority-language parent and the child is deemed to be of particularly great importance.

1.6　Lessons Learned from Previous Studies

Two studies of bilingual families in Japan conducted by American women married to Japanese men—Noguchi (1996) and Kamada (1995, 1997)—highlight one person/one language's limitations, but fail to provide convincing evidence of a better path to productive bilingualism. The general views on bilingualism of both Noguchi and Kamada are similar to those expressed by the female participants in my questionnaire study. In bilingual families featuring the wife as native English-speaker, there is a perceived conflict between conforming to the Japanese maternal stereotype and adhering to one person/one language. In other words, many mothers expressed the need to speak Japanese with their children in order to fit into Japanese society. The vagueness of Noguchi's and Kamada's recommendations for bilingual parents may be seen as connected to the vagueness with which we now define bilingualism.

1.6.1　Modeling Bilingualism

Twenty-six of the sixty-nine respondents to Noguchi's bilingualism survey felt dissatisfied with one person/one language because it "was seen to be impolite or alienating" (1996: 251). Noguchi argues that rigid adherence to a single bilingualism strategy can cause emotional stress or communication problems within the family (1996: 245), and she recommends that parents act as bilingual models for children. Modeling requires the native English-speaking parent to learn Japanese, make Japanese friends, and

become actively involved in the child's world (Noguchi 1996: 255-56). Although Noguchi repeatedly refers to "modeling," she does not explain in detail the rules of her proposal. In some situations she advocates the use of Japanese by the native English-speaking parent. One example would be when helping the child with homework (1996: 248). However, reversion to the majority language on the grounds that smooth communication is of immediate importance could lead to serious problems. The minority-language parent would have license to use Japanese on any (important) occasion, resulting in the relegation of English to decorative status. Noguchi states: "maximum contact with the minority language is seen as essential" (1996: 254). Yet, her modeling approach appears to provide children with significantly less exposure to English than one person/one language does.

1.6.2 Kamada's Bilingualism Case Studies

Kamada's case studies of twenty bilingual families exemplify how changes in bilingualism's definition have influenced current research. Kamada does not attempt to define bilingualism and does not deal with methodology at all in her two monographs, published in 1995 and 1997. She admits any amount of exposure to two languages as evidence of bilingual development, as evidenced by her studies of bilingualism in a three-year old child (1995: 7-9) and trilingualism in a two-year old child (1995: 15). She is primarily interested in the subjects themselves as human beings living with two cultures and languages. At the conclusion of the first monograph, Kamada identifies several factors—including the mother's use of the minority language, good language acquisition techniques, and visits overseas—that "contribut[e] to the development of bilinguality" (1995: 32). The studies, admittedly, are not intended to be exhaustive or scientific. How-

ever, they do reflect the current lack of concern in bilingualism studies for methodology and precision in measuring minority language proficiency.

1.7 Conclusion

The definition of bilingualism has loosened, and, perhaps as a consequence, many parents no longer feel that mastery of the minority language is a priority. Even if parents agree with one person/one language in principle, they may reject it on the grounds that it does not meet family needs. Generally, the one person/one language method does not seem unsuitable for Japanese-English families in Japan. However changing attitudes towards bilingualism have reduced the method's appeal. English -language fathers may have less difficulty in following one person/one language than English-language mothers. Regarding the question of whether or not the Japanese community is conducive to Japanese-English bilingualism, it is important to stress that the attitudes towards English that are current in Japanese society have little to do with bilingualism. Bilingual parents are not driven to teach their children English because of the language's status or its potential financial rewards. At worst, the plight of families struggling towards bilingualism may not be understood by society, but lack of understanding should not be seen as an excuse for one's inability to raise a child with two languages. Parents need to motivate their children to use English actively, and to act as linguistic models for their children. The parents of unsuccessful or struggling bilinguals are, naturally, more likely to find fault with a superficially supportive Japanese society.

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