

## Being and Becoming a Speaker of Japanese

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# **Being and Becoming a Speaker of Japanese**

## **An Autoethnographic Account**

Andrea Simon-Maeda

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This book is dedicated in loving memory to my sister Janet, our family's historian who helped me excavate old photos and memories of my past life in the United States.

## Note

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*Part 1*



# Introduction

## Conceptual Framework



**Figure 1** First day in Japan

The Photograph does not necessarily say *what is no longer*, but only and for certain *what has been*. This distinction is decisive. In front of a photograph, our consciousness does not necessarily take the nostalgic path of memory . . . but for every photograph existing in the world, the path of certainty: the Photograph's essence is to ratify what it represents. (Barthes, 1981: 85, italics in original)

The statement above by Roland Barthes, the French social theorist, is a poststructuralist, philosophical response to positivism's reliance on hard scientific facts when describing the human condition. For Barthes, the representational force of a photograph is not amenable to scientific analysis; hence, an alternative disciplinary approach is necessary to understand the complex ways in which photographs and other types of visual imagery help us make meanings about our world. Objectivist, scientific analyses of

social phenomena take a particular theoretical stance toward the nature of reality and tailor their positivistic methodologies accordingly. Poststructuralist and postmodernist paradigms,<sup>1</sup> on the other hand, embrace subjectivity and life's multiple realities that qualitative researchers weave into their investigative 'bricolage – a pieced-together set of representations that is fitted to the specifics of a complex situation' (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000: 4). Whereas a methodological goal of positivistic studies is to erase the subjectivity of the researcher, in qualitative approaches such as autoethnography, 'the subject and object of research collapse into the body/thoughts/feelings of the (auto)ethnographer located in his or her particular space and time' (Gannon, 2006: 475). Photographs, therefore, used as qualitative data in autoethnography are not merely flat reflections of the narrator's private life but rather are multidimensional 'commentaries on cultural histories and the texts that shaped and formed us' (Finley, 2005: 686).

Autoethnography, as one genre of qualitative research, differs from classic ethnographic (e.g. Malinowski, 1967) depictions of culture as something apart from the researcher, and instead 'shifts the gaze inward toward a self as a site for interpreting cultural experience' (Neumann, 1996: 183). This methodological strategy is carried out through 'highly personalized accounts where authors draw on their own experiences to extend understanding of a particular discipline or culture' (Holt, 2003: 2). Arthur Bochner provides a succinct explanation:

The narrative turn moves away from a singular, monolithic conception of social science toward a pluralism that promotes multiple forms of representation and research; away from facts and toward meanings; away from master narratives and toward local stories; away from idolizing categorical thought and abstracted theory and toward embracing the values of irony, emotionality, and activism; away from assuming the stance of the disinterested spectator and toward assuming the posture of a feeling, embodied, and vulnerable observer; away from writing essays and toward telling stories. (Bochner, 2001: 134–135)

In autoethnographic reports, visual and textual materials are presented as interactive referents to ongoing constructions of the narrator's social, cultural and linguistic worlds. Hence, personal photos that document my ever-evolving existence as a second language learner of Japanese are interspersed throughout this book together with fieldnotes, documents and transcripts of recorded interactions to provide the reader with an in-depth account of my Japanese as a second language (JSL) history.

The photo above (see Figure 1), taken together with my former English-as-a-second-language (ESL) students in the United States on the first day of my arrival in Japan in April 1975, is a visual artifact of where and who I was at the beginning of my JSL learning trajectory. Looking at this photo 35 years later, I reflect on Barthes' remark that the effect of viewing a past

image of oneself 'is not to restore what has been abolished (by time, by distance) but to attest that what I see has indeed existed' (Barthes, 1981: 82). Someone else looking at this photo would only see a group of people, one of whom appears to be of a different racial background, having their picture taken at a famous landmark, much like a scene in photo albums of tourists worldwide. From a postmodernist viewpoint, however, travel scenes are blurred images, since notions of geographical locality, nationality and culture have become unhinged from their traditional representations as bounded, unifying entities. Socio-political upheavals and global diasporas have led to a keen awareness of how these phenomena impact on peoples' ways of describing themselves as 'foreigner', 'expatriate', 'tourist', 'native/nonnative' and of how these self-identifications fluctuate according to life circumstances. Drawing on Gloria Anzaldúa's (1987) concept of 'border crossings' to depict the fluidity in Mexican women's identity constructions, Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson comment that

[t]he fiction of cultures as discrete, objectlike phenomena occupying discrete spaces becomes implausible for those who inhabit the borderlands. Related to border inhabitants are those who live a life of border crossings – migrant workers, nomads, and members of the transnational business and professional elite. What is 'the culture' of farm workers who spend half a year in Mexico and half in the United States? Finally, there are those who cross borders more or less permanently – immigrants, refugees, exiles, and expatriates. In their case, the disjuncture of place and culture is especially clear. (Gupta & Ferguson, 2001: 34)

In subsequent chapters, the story of my own transnational disjuncture will be presented in all of its textual, visual and ideological manifestations. Similar to numerous reports from transplanted individuals who come to grips (or not) with ambivalent feelings of displacement and loss [see Pavlenko (2006) for a collection of up-to-date, comprehensive analyses of the languages and lives of bi/multilingual speakers], my autoethnography highlights how my disconnection from a life left behind in the United States is neither complete nor has it followed a preordained path. My lives before and after relocating to Japan are depicted in my narrative as being interrelated experiences that together propelled my trajectory to where and who I am now. Although my JSL language behavior is inherently embedded in local, concrete social interactions and larger ideological discourses<sup>2</sup> in Japan, my being and becoming a Japanese speaker is, at the same time, an idiosyncratic assemblage of my past, present and imagined language experiences and identities.<sup>3</sup> This line of theorizing is based on a cultural anthropological model that, as Holland *et al.* explain, aims

to respect humans as social and cultural creatures and therefore bounded, yet to recognize the processes whereby human collectives

and individuals often move themselves – led by hope, desperation, or even playfulness, but certainly by no rational plan – from one set of socially and culturally formed subjectivities to another. (Holland *et al.*, 1998: 6–7)

## Locating Autoethnography in SLA and Applied Linguistics

Previous diary studies (Bailey, 1983; Schmidt & Frota, 1986; Schumann & Schumann, 1977), autobiographical reports of L2 educators and scholars (Belcher & Connor, 2001) and stories of bi/multilingual speakers (Kanno, 2003; Pavlenko, 2001; Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004) have made significant contributions to the fields of SLA and applied linguistics by giving emic<sup>4</sup> (insider) perspectives on second language learning and use. Meryl Siegal's (1996) ethnographic study of white western women studying Japanese in Japan and Karen Ogulnick's (1998) diary study of her own JSL learning processes were earnest attempts to capture the sociolinguistic complexities in resolving the dissonance between newly acquired linguistic and cultural experiences and one's previous ways of speaking and behaving. In her review of narrative analysis in language studies, Deborah Schiffrin remarks that 'stories are resources not just for the development and presentation of a self as a psychological entity but as someone located within a social and cultural world' (Schiffrin, 1996: 169). Similarly, through the telling of my story I describe my JSL development not as a psycholinguistically based, mastery learning model of language acquisition. Rather, my focus is on the important role of sociocultural contexts and interactions between myself and both Japanese and non-Japanese individuals with whom I have come into contact over the course of my personal and professional life in Japan.

While not dismissing the important contributions of conventional structural analyses of bilingualism (see relevant chapters in Bhatia & Ritchie, 2006), current conceptualizations of SLA processes take into more serious consideration the crucial role of socialization factors (see e.g. Bayley & Schecter, 2003) that defy quantification of isolated variables. Relatedly, the following quote from Steven Thorne stresses the importance of not overlooking the interconnectedness of speech and social contexts:

Style, intonation, prosody, and talk-in-interaction and its organizational structure are all implicated in this larger understanding of the organization of communicative practices, their historical and situated qualities, and the dialectical process whereby talk-in-interaction and grammaticized features of a language are the sociocultural qualities which co-constitute the context within which communicative practices occur, and reciprocally, the cultural-historical-discursive qualities of social context tend to (re)inculcate communicative practices in their social, ideological, and culturally specific forms. (Thorne, 2000: 235)

Investigative importance is also increasingly being placed on the socio-political implications of L2 minority speakers' attempts to gain access to mainstream society (see e.g. Heller, 2007 and also Menard-Warwick, 2009). My situation in Japan is different from that of L2 populations worldwide who 'are placed at a disadvantage in situations where their linguistic performance is judged by members of classes other than their own ... [who] have to do what they can with what they have, given the structural relations of inequality in which they find themselves' (Heller, 2007: 14). However, as I explain in subsequent chapters, my privileged sociolinguistic position is highly subject to the vagaries of Japan's ideological discourses concerning *gaikokujin* (literally, a person outside of the country).

My conceptual framework drew on reflexive research practices in the social sciences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Richardson, 2000) and recent SLA and applied linguistics theoretical alternatives (e.g. Atkinson, 2011; Block, 2003) to positivistic paradigms that continue to 'seek the Grail of objective and factual reporting of objective reality' (Clough, 2002: xii). Ethnographic case studies of bi/multilingual speakers' lives (e.g. Simon-Maeda, 2009) can uncover the unquantifiable, personal and socially interactive aspects of language experiences hidden in statistical results that often serve simply as fodder for sweeping generalizations about L2 processes.

In sum, this book is not merely a nostalgic tale of my social and linguistic encounters in Japan. As Ogulnick concludes in her collection of various authors' language-learning stories, 'there is a dialectic between language learning and identity that is inextricably linked to our historical experiences and the sociopolitical contexts in which we find ourselves' (Ogulnick, 2000: 170). Introspective analyses of the interconnectedness of language learning, identity and larger socio-historical contexts have increased in visibility and consequently academic legitimacy, due noticeably to the voluminous work of Aneta Pavlenko (see section References) over the past decade. Bi/multilingual speakers' subjective analyses of their language histories are no longer considered to be solely a source of interesting anecdotal data used to complement experimental studies. In the fields of SLA and applied linguistics, narrative research is now recognized as a research paradigm in its own right (see *TESOL Quarterly* 2011 special topic issue, also see Aneta Pavlenko's 2007 review of autobiographic narratives in applied linguistics) with an array of methodological strategies that can lead to more holistic interpretations of L2 and additional language experiences.

The autoethnographic research and writing style chosen for this book features detailed descriptions and analyses of the local exigencies of my daily life in Japan that have significantly influenced my JSL trajectory. As part of the postmodernist shift in qualitative research traditions (see Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; see also Ellis & Bochner, 1996) autoethnography can provide SLA and applied linguistics theorists with a unique insight into the multifaceted, socially mediated nature of language acquisition. As

such, this volume's overall postmodernist stance is in line with recent views of 'language learning as an emergent process [that] focuses on doing, knowing, and becoming rather than on the attainment of a steady state understood as a well-defined set of rules, principles, parameters, and so on.' (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006: 138).

## Researcher Positionality

Western academics always run the risk of exoticizing non-western cultures and their respective languages (see Kubota, 2005; Mohanty, 1988), and I do not profess to be endowed with the ability to wipe my researcher lens clean of essentializing perspectives on the situations I observed and analyzed.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, as Ladson-Billings comments, 'there is no magic in employing participant observation, narrative inquiry, or interviews . . . the qualitative researcher must guard against the connotation that qualitative work represents some more "authentic" form of research' (Ladson-Billings, 2000: 272).<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, despite the challenge of accurately portraying my own and others' situations, this book confronts the 'crisis of representation' (see Denzin & Lincoln, 2005: 18–20) by adhering to a comprehensive rendering of 'the personal, concrete, and mundane details of experience as a window to understanding the relationships between self and other or between individual and community' (Holman Jones, 2005: 766).

Along with the practice of forefronting researcher positionality in qualitative studies, mention must also be made of the methodological criterion of 'transferability' (see comprehensive explanation in Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Contrary to positivistic analyses' dependency on the generalizability of statistical results, transferability is qualitative research's gold standard for judging the robustness of 'the contextual similarity between the described situation and the situation to which the theory is to be transferred' (Davis, 1995: 441). In other words, the trustworthiness of my interpretive commentary depends on how well readers across different strands of L2 research are able to recognize in my study comparable trends and issues in their own disciplines, leading to theoretical cross-fertilization and ultimately new insights on language learning and use.

## Organization of the Book

Although for organizational coherence this book is separated into chapters focusing on particular themes in my past and present lives, as in most narrative accounts temporality is not neatly delineated, as Ochs and Capps explain:

[T]he domains of past, present, and yet-to-be-realized time are not neatly segmented in narratives of personal experience. . . . Rather, narratives ebb back and forth across different time zones, as narrators mine the significance of life events. Such temporal elasticity lies

at the very heart of personal narrative, in that narrative time is human time, and human time flows back and forth from moments remembered, to the unfolding present, to moments imagined. (Ochs & Capps, 2001: 200)

Therefore, while narrating a certain segment of my JSL trajectory, events from different time periods will be interwoven throughout the storyline. The incorporation of previous events, thoughts and the actual words of my own or others into my account is a literary device that Mikhail Bakhtin has described as a dialogical process wherein 'any utterance is a link in a very complexly organized chain of other utterances' (Bakhtin, 1986: 69). As such, my authorial voice becomes decentered through the telling of my story that is essentially a collaboratively constructed (re)presentation of my JSL life.

The book is divided into two parts. Part I contains an introductory chapter and two subsequent chapters that explain the conceptual framework of the volume. In Chapter 1, I elaborate on how autoethnography is a postmodernist methodological approach to examining the link between language and identity. Key concepts in the opening sections serve as a guidepost for readers in understanding postmodernist thought and how it constitutes the basis of autoethnographic research. Chapter 2 outlines the academic research history of narrative inquiry in SLA and applied linguistics with numerous citations from the relevant literature. Later sections focus on recent postmodernist interpretations of the interconnectiveness of second language acquisition and identity. I adopt a more narrative style in Part II that opens with Chapter 3 featuring the origins of my language-learning history with photographs and verbatim transcripts interspersed throughout the narrative storyline and interpretive commentary. In order to probe my JSL narrative in all of its dialectically complex dimensions I have included transcribed verbatim data segments of interactions between myself and participants in my two-year ethnographic study of bi/multilingual speakers in Japan (Simon-Maeda, 2009). For me and my bi/multilingual participants, our shared 'multilingual habitus' (House, 2003) evolved through diverse speech activities analyzed from both micro (discourse analytical) and macro (ethnographic) perspectives. This analytical plan brought to the fore the mutually constitutive nature of discourse behavior and sociocultural contexts and the resultant effect on our L2 identities shaped on the periphery of Japanese society that does not always welcome foreigners. Throughout this and subsequent chapters I critically reflect in postmodernist terms on my position as an expatriate in Japan and the place of language in the formation of my outsider identity. More intimate ethnographic details of my life in Japan are presented in Chapter 4. I relate how my evolving identities as a wife and mother have profoundly impacted on my JSL development. Special note is made of the gendered nature of partner and family relationships and of how Japanese