

## Book Reviews

### **The Idea of English in Japan: Ideology and the Evolution of a Global Language**

By Philip Seargeant

Bristol: Multilingual Matters (2009). XV + 188 pages

At the start of each semester I generally have my students set themselves an individual goal for the course that they are taking with me. Representative responses usually run along the lines of “I want to improve my English because I want to be a *kokusaijin* [international person]”; “I will try to become able to speak positively with foreigners”; and “I want to develop my pronunciation so that I sound more like a native speaker”. Such statements continue to intrigue me because I have always assumed that the ways in which language learners conceptualize the target language impact upon their language learning experiences. However, it was Philip Seargeant’s extremely engaging articulation of precisely how a discourse of English is constructed, negotiated, and expressed in Japanese society that provided me with a framework to better understand my students’ responses as well as the broader sociolinguistic terrain of Japan.

The central tenet of Seargeant’s argument is that the meanings associated with any given language “are culturally constructed within the society in which the language is operational, and are thus specific to that particular society rather than to the language itself” (p. 2). In the case of Japan, he argues that English is frequently “assigned a particular emblematic meaning which contrasts very specifically with Japanese values” (p. 16), and it is this particular view of English in Japan that “predispose[s] people to a particular relationship with it” (ibid).

Seargeant develops this argument by providing a two-pronged “interrogation of the beliefs that constitute the symbolic meaning attributed to English in Japan” (p. 3). First, he focuses on discourses of English education in Japan by analyzing official statements and documents of the Ministry of Education, the structural organization of institutions involved in English education, as well as interview data collected from English language learners. Second, Seargeant turns more broadly to the field of popular culture to consider how English is utilized in such media as pictorial advertisements, ‘study abroad’ promotional literature, the architecture and ornament of schools, tourist attractions, employment policies, and television programs. Particularly insightful and entertaining is his discourse analysis of a segment from *Karakuri Terebi*’s ‘Funniest English’. Who says sociolinguistics can’t be cool?

Although, at first glance, the eclectic and multifaceted methodological approach of *The idea of English in Japan* may appear to some as unnecessarily complex, if not a little piecemeal, Seargeant's approach is both productive and convincing. The three key themes to emerge from his analysis – globalization, authenticity, and aspiration – work in unison to drive the author's argument forward.

In the chapter on the first theme, globalization, Seargeant argues that, rather than making Japan more 'international', the gradual absorption of English into Japanese society – or specifically, the reconfiguration of English into *wasei eigo* – has ironically rendered Japan less international. He maintains that “by managing shifts in semantics and co-opting [English] for purely ornamental purposes, the language is, in effect, made foreign to the global community, and could thus be said to act as a further boundary between Japan and [the] outside world” (p. 85).

The chapter on the second theme, authenticity, is a very interesting exposé on the myth of the 'native speaker' and the remarkable esteem that Japanese people often have for 'native speakers'. The case studies from both the commercial *eikaiwa* sector as well as *gaikoku mura* (foreign country theme parks) are particularly engaging.

And finally, the chapter on the third theme, aspiration, builds on earlier works (Kelsky, 2008; Piller & Takahashi, 2006) to provide an interesting discussion of how acquiring English in Japan, as well as the motivation for doing so, parallels a desire for social mobility, romance, travel, and other banal aspirations. Seargeant turns his attention to such things as slogans from university promotional literature, advertising posters for *eikaiwa*, and 'study abroad' magazines and argues that the *pursuit* of English “becomes a means of expressing one's identity and of negotiating aspects of one's native culture” such that “linguistic competence need not be the desired outcome at all, but instead it is an engagement with the processes represented by English language learning – and by the status and meaning that the language has in contemporary Japan – that appears to be the true object of the motivation” (p. 131) to learn English.

*The idea of English in Japan* is not for the faint-hearted. Though not impenetrable, the author's writing style is far from laconic. Structurally, the book ducks and weaves through a variety of data sets, gradually building its case, albeit at times leaving the reader disoriented. The book is also contentious – a characteristic of all good writing from the field of critical linguistics. However, it certainly is a book worth reading. Whether you are an English teacher in Japan, an English speaking resident of the country, or simply interested in Japan's interface with the international community, Philip Seargeant's *The idea of English in Japan* will undoubtedly challenge you to think about the language ideologies of Japan in fresh and dynamic ways. For that reason alone, this engaging and original

book is highly recommended.

*References:*

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## **Hybrid Identities and Adolescent Girls: Being 'Half' in Japan**

**By Laurel D. Kamada**

**Bristol: Multilingual Matters (2010) 258 + xx pages**

Adolescence is a tough time for almost everyone; it is the period in life when people generally struggle to form a personal and social identity independent of their parents, trying to answer questions such as “Who am I?” and “How do I fit in?”

Nonetheless, English-speaking Caucasians married to Japanese and living in Japan are often shocked at how difficult it is for their children to forge an identity, especially if they are going to local Japanese schools. Although these white parents are for the most part positioned as outsiders in Japan, they are also usually viewed with a great deal of esteem due to the high status of Western culture in general and the English language in particular. Moreover, their Japanese spouses come from the majority population. With both parents enjoying relatively privileged status, they may embrace very positive views of their children’s “double” identities. However, the children themselves, having been born and raised in Japan, naturally want to fit in with their Japanese peers and may completely reject one side of their heritage, especially since their “foreign” genes and cultural heritage often lead to their being positioned as “*gaijin*”. Thus, the way these parents view their children and how the children see themselves may be quite different.

This mismatch was highlighted in 1998 during an explosive discussion by parents on the Bilingualism Special Interest Group’s e-list about their children’s identity and the bullying that some of them were facing. This debate and the tensions it brought into focus led Laurel Kamada to begin a study of the way such children forge their own identities and position themselves in various contexts in their daily lives. Kamada, one of

the founding members of the SIG and the parent of a biracial child herself, located six young girls, each of whom had a native English speaking parent and a Japanese parent and was going to a public Japanese school in Western Japan. The girls all knew each other and were close friends, even though they did not go to the same schools. Kamada brought the girls together for interviews, group discussions and social interaction on a number of occasions over the course of a little over two years between the time they were sixth graders in elementary school and their second year in junior high school. She collected a variety of data during these sessions, including tape recordings of six discussions among some or all of the participants. The fruits of her research are presented in the book under review, which is based on her doctoral dissertation.

*Hybrid Identities and Adolescent Girls: Being 'Half' in Japan* strives to answer three central research questions. First, it asks if these children face tensions and dilemmas in developing their ethnic identity, and if they do, how they deal with them. Second, it asks if they are able to find ways to celebrate their ethnic identity. Finally, it investigates how their ethnicity and gender interact in terms of their identity. Kamada utilizes a multi-perspective social constructionist discourse analytic framework which incorporates several types of post-structuralist discourse analysis to examine the way the girls talked about themselves and how this changed over time as they moved from childhood into pubescence.

The work offers many valuable insights into how such teenagers view themselves and the difficulties they face because of the way they are regarded by the Japanese with whom they interact. I personally found it intriguing that when Kamada asked the participants what they preferred to be called in either English or Japanese, and gave them such options as *multiethnic*, *double*, *half*, and *Eurasian*, all of the girls wrote that “they just wanted to be called by their given names” (p. 7). Thus, early on, we are given a hint of the discomfort the girls feel with the different categories they are put into. In the transcript excerpts presented in the book, the girls repeatedly stress how they hated to be called “*haafu*” (the most common Japanese term for them) when they were little, but they were even more mortified when they were referred to as *gaijin*—a positioning they felt was totally unwarranted. They had, after all, been born and raised in Japan, gone to Japanese schools, spoke Japanese and were more at home in Japanese society than anywhere else.

Yet the girls make it clear that they constantly faced marginalization. Kamada explains this by repeatedly invoking the Japanese proverb *deru kui wa itareru* (“The protruding nail gets hammered down”). She points out:

This study found that while the participant girls of this study worked hard to conform to the *norms of Japanese behavior*, conforming to the *norms of physical appearance* was something that was beyond their agency and out of their control, as they recurrently attracted the stare and notice of others due to their conspicuous hybrid features. (p. 220)

In one poignant excerpt, one of the participants stresses that even though she dislikes *gaijin* and intends to be Japanese (“*nihonjin no tsumori*”), when she looks in the mirror, she sees that she’s not Japanese, and that really bothers her (p. 183).

Yet Kamada also shows how the participants eventually find things to celebrate about their double ethnicity and even their dual racial attributes. In their discussions, the girls find “cultural capital” in their access to two languages and two sets of literature, in their friendships with other children like themselves outside of school, and in the possibility of better jobs and wider prospects in the future. By the last session, they have even begun to realize that the physical differences that have for so long set them apart from their peers may actually end up making them more attractive. The young girls start to appreciate their “exotic” looks, with their deep-set eyes and their curvaceous, more “ideal” (Western-like) figures.

Kamada states in several places in the work that she wished to allow the participants’ voices to be heard, and I believe she has succeeded in this. For this reason, I would recommend this book to parents and teachers of such children. In the well-chosen excerpts, readers can see the tensions these girls face as they try to establish identities in a culture which often does not accept them as its own even though they were raised in it and want to be a part of it. Kamada is to be commended for not depicting the participants as helpless victims; rather, she shows them struggling to come to terms with their “hybridity” and gradually learning to celebrate it. By reading the participants’ voices, parents and educators can become aware of this struggle and also see the eventual fruition of the girls’ endeavors. They can also come to understand how biliteracy, overseas trips, and friendships with children of similar backgrounds can help in this process. Such knowledge should not only give the parents hope, but also help them support their children as they try to forge their identities—a process which Kamada notes is “hard work” (p. 216).

In addition to these insights, *Hybrid Identities and Adolescent Girls* has a number of other strengths. Kamada firmly bases her research on a solid theoretical framework which she clearly explains. She also provides a thoughtful analysis of the *discourses*, or “commonsense structures” and social practices, that affect the way such children are

positioned in Japanese society. Although she tends to get bogged down in jargon to some extent, Kamada does a commendable job of explaining the complex theories she utilizes. She cites a wide range of previous research, including several unpublished doctoral dissertations, in a variety of fields relevant to the study. The depth and breadth of her reading is truly impressive.

Unfortunately, the work is marred by a number of shortcomings. Overall, the presentation is poorly organized and includes a great deal of unnecessary repetition. Moreover, Kamada often gets ahead of herself, using terminology before she has defined it and referring to facts about the participants that have not yet been presented. In addition, her word choice, grammar, and syntax are frequently incorrect. Thus, the work would have greatly benefited from far more rigorous editing.

The choice of the terminology Kamada uses for the participants also seems problematic—although, as noted above, it is difficult to find an acceptable term for them. While reading the first chapter, I found myself getting increasingly irritated by Kamada's use of the term "multi-ethnic" without explaining why she chose it, when she was also continually referring to the participants' parents as "white" and talking about how these children could not conform to "Japanese norms of physical appearance" (p. 6). Clearly, the problem she was highlighting had to do with their genetic makeup as manifested in *racial* characteristics. Kamada eventually presents the reasoning behind her decision to use the term "ethnicity" instead of "race" in Chapter 2, but for this reader, that seemed to come too late and was still not totally convincing.

Furthermore, despite the wealth of remarkable data she collected, Kamada often foregrounds her own jargon-laden description of the excerpts instead of letting the data speak for itself or carefully analyzing the girls' discourse to show the reader how she reached her conclusions. In addition, she made a number of mistranslations and misinterpretations of the Japanese utterances in the data, occasionally altering the overall meaning. All of these problems mean that the work is at times difficult to read. Nonetheless, for its insights into the way these children struggle to position themselves in satisfactory ways—and the ways in which they eventually succeed, this is still a book worth reading.

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