INCIPIENT BILINGUALS: SENSITISING JAPANESE LEARNERS TO LANGUAGE CHOICE

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1. Introduction

Three decades of research have taught us that the choices we make at every level of a communicative event –linguistic, prosodic, and non-verbal– add shades of meaning to our message. Those choices reveal who we believe ourselves to be, who we believe others to be, and what kind of relationship we believe is unfolding between us. In multilingual settings, the very language we choose to speak carries such social portent.

Within the framework of Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) (Giles & Coupland, 1991), language choices are seen as an attempt to manipulate social distance (Schumman, 1976). *Convergence* is the strategy used to reduce social distance, and studies show speakers adapting a range of communicative behaviours –speech rate, pause length, utterance length, vocabulary choice, degree of formality, smiling and eye contact– to their interlocutor. When similar factors are manipulated to increase social distance, CAT labels such strategies *divergence*. Problems occur when an attempt by one participant to converge on linguistic lines is perceived by another as divergence on a psychological level. There is evidence to suggest this scenario occurs frequently in encounters between Japanese and foreigners in Japan, and that these encounters end in communication breakdown.

2. Code choice in multilingual contact in Japan

Giles & Coupland (1991) define communication breakdown as occurring when "the differential use of verbal, vocal, and non-verbal features can lead to misunderstanding and misattribution" (1991: 101). In Japan, where English is

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compulsory study for six years of high school and is also a required subject on many university degree courses, many learners seem predisposed to the code choice of English when they meet foreigners:

> In Japan, as a rule, Japanese is not the first choice in a conversation between a native and a foreigner if it is initiated by the Japanese. As a matter of fact, by many it is not even the first choice when the foreigner speaks first and speaks Japanese […].
>
> (Coulmas, 1987: 99)

This assertion finds empirical support in a survey of 1209 Japanese university students studying English (McAulay, 1998). Sixty percent of respondents believed all foreigners in Japan could speak English. One is four stated they would always use English to initiate a conversation with a foreigner, while two in three thought it appropriate to codeswitch to English with a foreigner speaking broken Japanese.

A number of commentators point out that if a foreigner initiates a conversation in Japanese, the Japanese person will switch to English. The Japanese will continue in English beyond the point where the foreigner has exhibited competence in Japanese. It is reported that in some instances, the Japanese will maintain the code choice of English even when the foreigner plainly does not speak English (Miller, 1982; Coulmas, 1987; Rubin, 1992; Green, 1994; Hoffer, 1996; Loveday, 1996). Invariably, these incidents of communication breakdown appear to be emotionally charged for all the participants. In a letter to *The Japan Times,* ('Hospital staff only wanted to help,' October 1995), a Japanese doctor expressed his surprise and dismay when a foreign woman angrily took exception to his offer of help, in English, in the hospital lift. A Kyoto high school student, given a project called 'Gaijin Hunt' by her teacher, was "frustrated" when the foreigner she accosted on the street answered in Japanese to the questions she posed in English ('Conquering fear of speaking', *The Daily Yomiuri,* Dec. 1993).

On the other side of the Gaijin Hunt divide, there is resentment at being spoken to in English. Hoffer (1996) refers to Japanese people who use only English with foreigners as 'Ebs;' English Bastards and English Bitches. Green (1994) prefers to call them 'Language Bandits.' An American colleague of mine called them 'English Leeches,' because "they suck all the English out of you." Miller (1982: 159) directs his criticism towards Japanese attitudes to foreigners using their language: "A foreigner speaking Japanese amounts to the public performance of an unnatural act".

Clearly, participants in these episodes of multilingual contact feel they are being misrepresented as the discourse evolves. They are bringing forth valued identities which they feel are unacknowledged or rejected. The process of rejection may begin with initial code choice.

3. Code choice and communication breakdown

The fact that the simple action of making the initial code choice of English can generate such tension reveals the "interconnection between momentary and apparently insignificant misunderstandings and larger social consequences" (Roberts *et al*., 1992: 89). At this point it is worth stressing that just as successful encounters of intercultural contact are usually a result of efforts by all the parties involved, communication breakdown occurs as a result of actions by all participants. Japanese students choosing to speak to foreigners in English will have a positive communication experience in many instances. However, in some instances they will find that strategy is not successful. An awareness of alternative strategies available to them as such times can help avoid communication breakdown. It is worth pointing out that our concern here is the Japanese learner, but the foreign interlocutor is equally responsible for maintaining successful communication. Wiemann & Giles (1996) argue that communicative competence is a feature of relationships, not individuals. As EFL teachers we may not be able to do much about the Westerners who find it "easier to condemn Japanese as xenophobic than to learn Japanese" (Lie, 2001: 173), but we are required to teach our students how to circumvent these situations, and how to recover them if they do arise. Current EFL practices in Japan not only fail to do this, they sometimes do the opposite and prime students to meet with communication breakdown in the real world.

One contributing practice is enforced monolingualism (Cullen & Morris, 2001). Use of the L1 in the classroom tends to be proscribed, with students opting for long periods of silence rather than simply asking for the missing lexical item in Japanese (Helgesen, 1993; McVeigh, 2002). When codeswitching does take place in the classroom, it is presented as belittling to students (Burden, 2001) rather than the employment of a bilingual skill.

Another factor is an unbalanced portrayal in EFL materials of multilingual communication as stress-free and successful. For example, public broadcaster NHK's

Yasashii Eikaiwa ('Easy English Conversation') always opens with a skit in which a foreigner in Japan asks a Japanese person a question in English. The Japanese person fails to answer or gets confused. The language point is explained in the programme, and the show ends with the same skit, this time with the Japanese person answering in perfect English. At no point is the right of the foreigner to impose English in the Japanese setting questioned, and the foreigner never prefaces his remarks by asking, "Do you speak English?".

Finally, as the Gaijin Hunt episode shows, there is a sociocultural leaning towards a binary approach to the world as inhabited by Japanese-speaking Japanese and English-speaking Others (Lie, 2001). It is an approach that skewers both the chaotic multilingual, multiethnic world external to Japan, and the competing notions of national identity internally: "According to the contemporary discourse of Japaneseness, Japan has achieved the condition of 'one nation, one people'" (Lie, 2001: 113).

The vast majority of students arrive in their university English class having had little or no experience of meaningful contact with people who look and speak differently from themselves. Identity is presented in language and shaped by it; as Norton (2000: 128) states, it is "a site of struggle". That struggle only comes to the fore when our taken-for-granted assumptions are challenged. When faced with a foreigner in Japan, the identity that comes to the fore for many Japanese is their Japaneseness. This emphasis on Japaneseness as the salient social identity predisposes learners to carry out multilingual encounters in intergroup rather than interpersonal terms. When they have to make an initial code choice with a foreigner in their streets and towns, they converge towards the 'English-speaking Other' they see before them. If the linguistic reality is that the foreigner doesn't speak English, or if the salient social identity for that foreigner at that particular time happens to be 'Japanese-competent speaker,' then for the foreigner the use of English may be perceived as divergence. Each participant continues to avoid switching to the language of the other with each successive turn, the social distance yawns wider, and communication breakdown follows.

4. Sensitising learners to language choice: Video activity

Some might argue that we should refrain from criticising any attempt by Japanese students to speak English. One characteristic of the good language learner is

taking every opportunity to practice English (Rubin, 1975), and in Japan, the fundamental problem is not students using English inappropriately, but getting them to use English at all:

> In Japan, students are often described as active and positive (motivated) or passive and negative (unmotivated). But from my experience the issue is not whether they are motivated or not. The issue is more fundamental: we are dealing with a problem of whether students respond or not. (McVeigh, 2002: 196)

However, the fact is that codeswitching is a skill employed resourcefully by bilinguals in multilingual settings. The students we see in front of us day after day are incipient bilinguals. As such, they need to know how to manipulate the resources available to bilinguals. They need to know that codeswitching is not only available to them, but that in certain situations it is required of them. Such knowledge of communication strategies is one building block of communicative competence.

Given the sensitivity of Japanese learners to potentially fact-threatening acts (Nozaki, 1993), we need to introduce the topic in a manner that allows them to explore their own language choice preferences in multilingual settings without feeling those preferences are being judged negatively. The video activity 'Looking for Professor Hashimoto' has been designed towards that end. The video activity is implemented as follows:

1. The students are given a worksheet in Japanese (see Appendix 2) explaining that they have to go to see their tutor Professor Hashimoto at 11.00 AM today. They are shown a picture of Professor Hashimoto –a middle-aged male Japanese. It is important to mention, in as casual a manner as possible, that they may write in English, Japanese, French, Korean, Chinese or any language they feel is *appropriate to the situation*.
2. The students watch the video, which is shot from their POV. They go to the office, knock on the door, and enter. The person sitting in front of them is not Professor Hashimoto, but a Caucasian Westerner. The action freezes and a question appears on screen ("What would you say in this situation?"). On the worksheet, they write what they would say in the space provided.
3. After 30 seconds writing time, the screen unfreezes. The Westerner says *Hashimoto-sensei wa inai desu yo. Juni ji ni modoru to omoimasu* ["Professor Hashimoto isn't here. He'll be back at one o'clock"]. The action freezes again, and a question appears

asking the students to write their reply in the space provided. Usually, one of the following four patterns has emerged:

a. Japanese-Japanese-Japanese;
b. Japanese-Japanese-English;
c. English-Japanese-English;
d. English-Japanese-Japanese.

4. In the video, the students return to Professor Hashimoto's office five more times. Each time, the person they encounter is not Professor Hashimoto. Each time, they have to make their initial code choice based (partly) on the appearance of the person before them (see Appendix 1). Each time, they have to decide on the language to use in reply after that person has told them (in English, Japanese or Chinese) to come back in an hour.
5. At the end of the video, they compare their choices with their classmates. The following questions are written on the board for discussion:
   - Did you choose to speak in English or Japanese? Why?
   - Did you make different choices for different speakers? Why?
   - Did you change from English to Japanese or vice-versa with any one speaker? Why?
   - Did you understand the Chinese woman? Why do you think she spoke to you in Chinese?
6. Students report on their discussion and the different strategies they used.

In my experience, students have fun with the exercise and are motivated to discuss the reasons for their choices with their classmates. Only one of the six people in the video is Japanese (numbers 5 and 6 are Chinese), with two Caucasian men (1 and 2) and a Bangladeshi woman. Invariably, the students assume the Chinese women are Japanese. Some students say they initiate in English with foreigners (i.e., visually obvious foreigners), but have to modify this statement when they realise they have initiated in Japanese with the Bangladeshi woman and the two Chinese.

The Chinese woman who replies in Chinese is the most perplexing for students. I explain to them that she expected another Chinese student would be coming to the office looking for Professor Hashimoto, which is why she uses Chinese. Many of my students who have studied abroad testify that it is not an unusual occurrence for Japanese students to be mistaken for Chinese. In such situations, we have to hope they have developed the strategic competence necessary to recover the situation. Their reply

after being spoken to in Chinese gives the answer. From this, they can extrapolate and empathise with foreigners in Japan who might react negatively to being spoken to in English.

A myriad of patterns may emerge and I encourage students to compare and discuss these. More advanced students may wish to continue with a discussion of language choice issues; lower level students have become more aware of their code choice preferences and are better able for real world contact.

5. Conclusion

'Looking for Professor Hashimoto' does not simulate real-world intercultural contact. Nor is it meant to. The situation it portrays becomes more ridiculous the longer the video goes on. The humour this generates creates a safe, non-threatening classroom environment that allows students to confront their own language choice biases and discuss them with their peers. Japanese learners need this exposure in order to consider what Japaneseness means to them and how they represent this aspect of their identity in multilingual contact. It raises their awareness of the consequences and potential rewards of judicious of code choice.

Incipient Bilinguals Appendix 1: Characters in video (time, language, country)

1. 11.00 Replies in Japanese (Canada)	2. 12.00 Replies in English (USA)

3. 1.00 Replies in Japanese (Japanese)

4. 2.00 Replies in English (Bangladesh)

5. 3.00 Replies in Chinese (China)

6. 4.00 Replies in Japanese (China)

Appendix 2: Incipient Bilinguals lesson handout (translated from Japanese)

Looking for Professor Hashimoto

Today you *must* meet you tutor, Professor Hashimoto. Watch the video. The video will show YOU knocking on the door and entering Professor Hashimoto's office. Follow the on-screen instructions and write what you would say in the space provided. You have thirty seconds for each box.

11.00 AM

When you enter:

Your reply:

12.00 PM

When you enter:

Your reply:

1.00 PM

When you enter:

Your reply:

2.00 PM

When you enter:

Your reply:

3.00 PM

When you enter:

Your reply:

4.00 PM

When you enter:

Your reply:

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