

Second-Generation Japanese-Americans' Language Use

Kyoko Saito

[1. Introduction:]

The purpose of this project was to investigate second-generation Japanese-Americans' language use relating to the use of the Japanese language and the English language in the Los Angeles area in the U.S.A. I wanted to know exactly which language they used, to whom and when. Were they assimilated into the mainstream of the U.S.A.? Was the English language the most important vehicle in order to assimilate into the mainstream of the U.S.A.? and, How deeply did their experience in internment camps during World War II influence their attitude toward language?

I lived in California, U.S.A. from April 1980 to December 1990. Throughout my experience of living in the U.S.A., I had many opportunities to meet and to communicate with second-generation Japanese-Americans who were put in internment camps during World War II; however, they were born in the U.S.A., they were American citizens, and they remain in the U.S.A.

While talking with some second-generation Japanese-Americans, I often felt uncomfortable because I wondered how I should view them. Are they Americans? Are they Japanese? I could not understand, moreover, why the majority of Americans (Caucasians) call them Japanese-Americans but the majority of Americans do not call themselves French-Americans, British-Americans, or German-Americans, etc. Furthermore, I felt it strange that some second-generation Japanese-Americans could not speak nor understand Japanese well even though Japanese was their mother tongue. They only used Japanese when they communicated with their parents, who didn't speak English.

Throughout my experience in the U.S.A., I was interested in learning about the language situation of second-generation Japanese-Americans.

[2. Interviewees:]

I interviewed four second-generation Japanese-Americans who were put in internment camps during World War II.

(1) Mr. Matsunaga:

Mr. Matsunaga was born in February 1940 in Los Angeles. He entered Los Angeles Harbor Community College and majored in Arts. After he graduated from college, he became a gardener to help his father.

When Mr. Matsunaga attended the first grade of grammar school at age seven, he could speak only a little English. At the beginning, he had trouble understanding the lessons in English when he entered kindergarten and elementary school. He had two older brothers,

an older sister, and a younger brother. He acquired some English from his playmates and he acquired Japanese from his parents; however, his parents didn't teach him how to read and how to write Japanese. In his home, he spoke Japanese most of the time. He used a little English with his brothers and sister. He used only Japanese with his parents. Before he entered kindergarten, there was neither a Japanese book nor an English book in his home. He couldn't remember if he listened to Japanese radio programs or not, but he remembered that he used to listen to English radio programs.

He married a Japanese lady and he uses both English and Japanese with his wife. He said, "When I am upset, I use English, and when she does not really understand English, I have to change to Japanese." He uses only English when he communicates with his two children. Today, he doesn't read any Japanese books or magazines, and English is easier for him to speak, read, and write.

(2) Mrs. Ishibashi:

Mrs. Ishibashi was born in February 1932 in Los Angeles. She entered a community college and majored in Secretarial studies. After she married a second-generation Japanese-American, who was a farmer, she started selling her husband's products at a roadside stand in Torrance, California. Her husband's products included such items as corn, beet, tomatoes, zucchini, string beans, strawberries, and flowers.

Mrs. Ishibashi had a brother and sister. She acquired Japanese from her parents and she used only Japanese to communicate with other Japanese people. Before she entered kindergarten, she had Japanese books for small children, but she didn't have any English books. Her family had a short-wave radio, but she could not remember if she listened to Japanese radio programs. She didn't listen to any English radio programs. She had trouble understanding the lessons in English when she entered kindergarten and elementary school.

Today, she doesn't read any Japanese books, newspapers, or magazines. She uses only English with her husband and her children and she uses Japanese with her mother, mother-in-law, and her customers who have come from Japan. English is easier for her to speak, read, and write.

(3) Lily:

Lily was born in 1928 in Torrance, California. She earned a Bachelor of Arts from University of California, Los Angeles (U.C.L.A.), and two master's degrees, one from University of Southern California (U.S.C.), and one from California State University, Long Beach (C.S.U.L.B.). She majored in Social-Welfare at U.C.L.A., Counseling at U.S.C., and Linguistics at C.S.U.L.B. She is still taking courses at C.S.U.L.B.

Lily had two brothers and a sister. She acquired English from her Caucasian neighbors. When Lily communicated with her brothers and sister, she used English and she used Japanese with her parents. Before she entered kindergarten, her family had Japanese magazines and newspapers, but she just looked at the comic books. After she entered kindergarten, her parents sent her to a Japanese language school to learn how to read and write Japanese. She didn't have any trouble understanding English when she entered

kindergarten and elementary school, but throughout her education, she wasn't familiar with some idioms which most Caucasians grew up with.

She married a second-generation Japanese-American and she uses only English with her husband and her four children. She doesn't read any Japanese books, newspapers, or magazines. English is easier for her to speak, read, and write.

(4) Mr. Ishibashi:

Mr. Ishibashi was born in September 1912 in Portuguese Bend, California. His highest education is high school. He has been a farmer all his life.

Mr. Ishibashi had three brothers and a sister. He used only Japanese when he communicated with his brothers, sister, and parents. After Mr. Ishibashi started going to school, he and his siblings started speaking in English. He acquired Japanese from his parents and he learned how to read and write in Japanese at a Japanese language school. He was 15 or 16 years old when he went to the Japanese language school. Before he entered kindergarten, his family had neither Japanese books nor English books; moreover, his family didn't have a radio. When he entered kindergarten and elementary school, he didn't have any language trouble because all the students in his area were Japanese and nobody spoke in English; however, he said "I didn't know nothing about English. Nobody talk English. All Japanese so I went to school. I had to pick up English a little by little."

He is married to a Japanese lady and he uses only Japanese with his wife. He has two daughters and a son. He uses only English with his daughters and uses both English and Japanese with his son.

Today, he doesn't read any Japanese books, Japanese newspapers, or Japanese magazines. English is easier for him to speak, read, and write.

[3. Materials: (Question 1 through question 14)]

Question 1: Which language did you use when you communicated with your parents before you entered kindergarten?

Japanese 100%

Question 2: Could your parents speak English?

No 100%

Question 3: Which language did you use when you communicated with your brothers and sisters before you entered kindergarten?

Japanese 75% English 25%

Question 4: Which language did you or your family use when all your family members were together?

Japanese 100%

Question 5: Did you have any schoolmates or classmates who could speak Japanese? Did you communicate with them in Japanese?

They had Japanese schoolmates. They used English with their Japanese schoolmates. (One interviewee didn't answer the question.) 75%

Question 6: Whom did you play with often before you entered kindergarten or elementary school?

Which language did you use when you played with them?

Can't remember 25%

Japanese friends and used Japanese with them. 50%

Japanese and Caucasian friends and mostly used English 25%.

Question 7: Who is your close friend now?

Is he (or she) a Japanese-American or an English speaker?

Mr. Matsunaga said, "*Sansei* (Third-generation Japanese-Americans. English speakers)."

Mrs. Ishibashi said, "Japanese-Americans."

Lily said, "I have combination friends."

Mr. Ishibashi said, "Japanese-Americans. All people who went to the camp. All Japanese-Americans."

Question 8: Which language do you use when you communicate with your Japanese friends?

English 75% English and Japanese 25%

Question 9: Which language do you use when you communicate with your Japanese-American friends?

English 75% English and Japanese 25%

Question 10: Whom do you have contact with more often, Japanese-Americans or the majority-Americans (Caucasians)?

Mostly Americans 75%

Japanese-Americans and majority-Americans (fifty-fifty) 25%

Question 11: Which language do you use when you communicate with your wife or husband?

English 50% English and Japanese 25% Japanese 25%

Question 12: Which language do you use when you communicate with your children?

English 100%

Question 13: Do you want your children to learn the Japanese language?

Yes 100%

Question 14: Do you want your children to accept Japanese culture and traditions?

Yes 100%

[4. Analyses of question 1 through question 14 elicits "Which language to whom" for second-generation Japanese-American language use.]

Before my four interviewees entered kindergarten, all of them used only Japanese when they communicated with their parents because they acquired Japanese from their parents and their parents couldn't speak English. Three of my interviewees used only Japanese when they communicated with their brothers and sisters before they entered kindergarten. All four of the interviewees used only Japanese when all their family members were together. Two of my interviewees used Japanese when they played with their

Japanese friends. One of them played with Caucasians and Japanese and she used mostly English with them. After all my interviewees entered kindergarten or elementary school, they used English with their Japanese classmates.

Today when they communicate with their Japanese and Japanese-American friends, they use English except with *kibei* who immigrated to the U.S.A. before World War II and returned to Japan during the War. After the War, they came back to the U.S.A.

Two of my interviewees married second-generation Japanese-Americans and they use only English when they communicate with each other. The others married Japanese whose English is not fluent; therefore, one of the two interviewees uses both English and Japanese, and the other uses Japanese, when they communicate with their wives. All four of my interviewees use English when they communicate with their children. They also all want their children to learn the Japanese language, culture, and traditions.

According to my four interviewees, Japanese was used in both their family domain and social domain with their playmates before they entered kindergarten. As soon as they started their education, English became the language of their social domain and Japanese a part of their family domain only with their parents. As Weinreich mentions in *Language in Contact*, "Sometimes the conditions of social advance may even require the ostensible ignorance of another language -which may be a person's mother tongue." (1972: page 78) This phenomenon appears in all of my four interviewees.

Today, English is used both in the family domain and social domain for two of my interviewees. One of them uses both English and Japanese in his family domain due to his wife's lack of English ability. The other uses Japanese in his family domain only with his wife.

[5. Materials: (Question 15 through Question 23)]

Question 15: Before you entered kindergarten, did you feel that you were an American?

No 75% Never thought about it 25%

Question 16: When did you realize that you were an American?

Mr. Matsunaga said, "Middle school. Our family were very very close. We didn't discuss other people that much. We more less stuck ourselves. We go well with other Japanese family. We usually associate with Japanese people."

Mrs. Ishibashi said, "Probably because World War II, when it was emphasized. We don't think about before that. Before 10, you don't think. You just know you are Japanese and go to English school during the day. You go to Japanese school every day, five days a week and you don't think about it but World War II makes think about. You want to be American because over here because you don't want to be anyone else. Enemy was Japan so."

Lily said, "Well some years ago I didn't feel subconscious because just a few Asians. Now so many Asians all over that I don't stand out anymore or I don't know I feel uncomfortable subconscious."

("You don't feel anything about you are an American or you are a Japanese-American?")

Lily answered, "No, I don't because we associate all, everything I read American so I think I feel like an American except they ask me various questions."

Mr. Ishibashi said, "I was told that I was Japanese. It was long time that we didn't have much trouble with American people. I never thought about that."

Question 17: Do you accept Japanese culture and traditions naturally or do you try to accept or learn Japanese culture and traditions?

Accept Japanese culture and traditions naturally. 100%

("Do you realize this is the Japanese way or this is the American way?")

Lily said, "Yes, I do realize difference: for example, when we say 'no,' we don't say 'no' directly. We say roundabout way. We may excuse. This is one thing."

Question 18: Do you accept American culture and traditions naturally or do you try to accept or learn American culture and traditions?

Accept American culture and traditions. 100%

Mr. Ishibashi said, "I don't know American culture and tradition is. I flow with crowd. I never think about American culture and traditions. American and Japanese culture and traditions are just blend."

Question 19: Did you feel strange when people called you a Japanese-American when you were a child? How about today?

No 100%

Mr. Matsunaga said, "No, today, acceptable. I don't feel bad. I've been neither one actually. People in Japan, we are not American. Americans look up us Japanese."

Mr. Ishibashi said, "I don't think anyone called me Japanese-American when I was a child. They called me just Japanese. They called us just Japanese. Today, it doesn't bother me."

Lily said, "They didn't call me Japanese-American. Those days they didn't use polite language. They often call me, call us Japs. I didn't like that. Today, it doesn't bother me."

Mr. Ishibashi said, "No, I never did. Not bad. They don't call me that anymore so I figure out I'm equal with them."

Question 20: Do you think that you have assimilated into the American society?

Yes 100%

Mr. Matsunaga said, "I think so. When I get out the school. It is necessity. I have to."

Mrs. Ishibashi said, "I do. I think after World War II ended then everybody spread out more and we were accepted up till then. I think maybe we feel we are accepted by everybody."

Lily said, "Yes, I think mentally I have assimilated but socially perhaps not so. Because I think I'm quite Japanese and outlook and I found some of *hakujin* (Caucasians) is

kind of shallow.”

Mr. Ishibashi said, “Yes. Yeah, a little way but not much. That was one thing I never thought about that. I feel just like equal so they like you. They like you.”

Question 21: Did your parents encourage you to speak in English or study English?

Yes 75% No 25%

Question 22: Is English the most important to assimilate into the American society?

Yes 100%

Mr. Matsunaga said, “Definitely. English is the most important. English language you have to know to survive here.”

Mrs. Ishibashi said, “Yes, very important. One hundred percent important.”

Lily said, “English is very important to assimilate into the American society. Without English, we can’t communicate with people. Need whole world is English anyway.”

Question 23: Do you think that the majority of Americans accept you as an American?

No 75% Yes 25%

Mr. Matsunaga said, “No, I don’t think because they look at you as your facial feature. They don’t look at you a person. They see me as oriental that it. Consider me oriental instead of consider me as American.”

Mrs. Ishibashi said, “Most, not all. I see, I still see prejudice. I’m sure if it like I talk with them, I get feeling, I individual that they accept. Japanese are whole you get a feeling. My next neighbor is the perfect example. She likes me being me but slips once a while. She said, ‘Uh, those Japs. Look what are they doing?’ so I think as a group, then she doesn’t want to whole California own by Japanese. That is fear. That it is because I’m her neighbor. One to one basis she likes me a lot but I hear her. Her children slip. When this door is closed, I imagine what kind of conversation going on. Headline of the paper ‘Oh, Japan bought all hotels.’ Initially slips, ‘Who those Japs.’ You know. We know how do they feel. I think others, too. Other could be good friends.”

Lily said, “No, I don’t think so. My facial feature is always distinct. They are always conscious I’m from another country.”

[6. Analyses of questions 15 through 23 about assimilation into the mainstream of the U.S.A.]

When all four interviewees were children, they didn’t feel that they were Americans. On the other hand, they felt that they were Japanese because they were treated as Japanese by their families and in the American society.

All four of them have accepted both Japanese and American cultures and traditions naturally. Both countries’ cultures and traditions are blended well in their daily lives and it must be difficult to distinguish the two countries’ cultures and traditions.

Their feelings about being Americans or Japanese were changed by World War II. They realized that they were Americans after World War II.

All four people think that they have assimilated into the American society because

they were born in the U.S.A., educated in the U.S.A., and they felt loyalty to their country (the U.S.A.), but they don't think that the majority of Americans accept them as Americans. The majority of Americans judge Japanese-Americans' nationality by their facial features. As long as the majority of Americans judge Japanese-Americans by their facial features, they will never be Americans.

All four interviewees realized that the English language is the most important factor to enable them to be assimilated into the American society and to survive in the American society.

François Grosjean states in *Life with Two Languages*:

"Public education is thus an important factor in language shift: minority children are taught in the majority language in an Anglo-American environment, and very quickly many of them begin to identify with the English language and its accompanying culture. When the home language and culture are strong enough, stable bilingualism and biculturalism may result, but most often it leads to English monolingualism" (1982: page.110) *"A final factor that has led many millions of immigrants to give up their native language for English is quite simply the assimilative power of American society."*(1982: page.111)

François Grosjean's statements above apply to all four of my interviewees because even though Japanese is their native language, it became weaker than English. As Grosjean states, my interviewees might give up their native language for English in order to assimilate into American society.

[7. Materials: (Question 24 through question 28)]

Question 24: When were you in the internment camp?

Do you remember the life in the camp?

Mr. Matsunaga said, "Two years old. I have a few memory not bad memory. Child only play that all."

Mrs. Ishibashi said, "Ten, eleven, twelve. That was fun because I was just a child. Adults were suffering. I'm sure, all children had fun. All Japanese go to school every day, play with them eat with them. I don't really think any suffering."

Before I interviewed Lily, one of her friends told me not to ask Lily about her life in an internment camp because Lily had told her friend that she didn't want to talk about her life in the camp. Therefore, I copied a part of her interview which I used for my Sociolinguistics course's term paper in 1988. In the interview, Lily said, "I remember many many things. We made many friends. At the same time, there were barbed wire fence surround us and soldiers all around with guns and we couldn't leave camp. We had to stay in. Otherwise people were shot. We had a big farm on camp. We had whole bunch of the mess halls where we ate. Barracks, people lived in a small rooms. Whole family live in a small room. As soon as we left the camp, my mother told us, 'No more Japanese. Only English.'"

Mr. Ishibashi said, "I don't want to involve that. It wasn't just normal. I didn't like come in jail nothing so just went to there. All *nihonjin* (Japanese) went to so I accepted that.

I went to there for self safe out there otherwise someone come in and shoot you. You are Japanese shoot you. Another word, we were safe but we stayed in camp less one year then we went to outside start to work with American people so we started farming in Utah. Over there, American people did say nothing about us. Keep talking then just like a brother and sister.”

Question 25: Which language did you use at school in the camp?

Mrs. Ishibashi and Lily went to school in the camp. They told me that they used only English at school in the camp.

Question 26: Which language did you use with your family in the camp?

Japanese 100%

Question 27: Was there any law that people must not use Japanese in the camp?

There was no law that people must not use Japanese in the camp but Lily said, “There was no law. No one spoke Japanese. All students were Japanese but no one spoke Japanese.” (“Why?”) Lily said, “I don’t know. Only one spoke in Japanese was *kibeis* but all they all spoke in English. We are all Japanese in the camp. All spoke in English. In their house, they had to use Japanese because their parents couldn’t use English. We are kind of Americanized. A lot of gone to school before so we just came camp and used which language which we have learned.”

Question 28: After you left the camp, did you ignore the use of English or Japanese?

No 100%

Mr. Matsunaga said, “No.”

Mrs. Ishibashi said, “No, spoke Japanese and English. With parents in Japanese. With brother and sister in English. With friends in English.”

Lily said, “I didn’t really ignore. I just use which ever language handy and appropriate that time. Combination of Japanese and English but mostly English.”

Mr. Ishibashi said, “No, I didn’t.”

[8. Analyses of questions 24 through 28 about language attitude from their experiences in the internment camp.]

Mr. Matsunaga and Mrs. Ishibashi don’t have bad recollections of being in the internment camp. Mrs. Ishibashi, especially, enjoyed staying in the camp. Both Mr. Matsunaga and Mrs. Ishibashi were young and they didn’t understand why they and their families were put in the camp. On the other hand, Lily and Mr. Ishibashi had bad recollections of the camp. Lily and Mrs. Ishibashi went to school in the camp. In school, they used only English; however, all students in the school were Japanese. Even though all four interviewees communicated in English in public, in the camp, they used Japanese with their parents because their parents couldn’t speak English.

After they left the camp, they communicated in English with their friends, brothers, and sisters but they used Japanese with their parents.

My four interviewees all used English at school and in public in the camp to show their

loyalty to the U.S.A.; however, they used both Japanese and English according to their circumstances. Nobody forced them and they never forced themselves to use English or Japanese in the camp and after they left the camp; however, Lily's mother forced Lily to use only English after they left the camp.

[9. Conclusion:]

My analyses show clearly which language my four second-generation Japanese-American interviewees use and to whom. All of my interviewees were raised by Japanese monolingual parents; therefore, three of them used only Japanese both in their homes and in public before they entered kindergarten. One of them, however, acquired English from her playmates, and she used a little English before she entered kindergarten.

As soon as they started their school education, they acquired and learned English quickly and they used English with their sisters, brothers, and their friends, but they used Japanese with their parents because their parents couldn't speak English. As they advanced to higher grades at school, their English became stronger and their native Japanese language became weaker.

All four of my interviewees were born in the U.S.A. and received public education in the U.S.A. They speak English as proficiently as the majority of Americans (Caucasians). They also accepted both American and Japanese cultures naturally. They think that they are Americans and they are assimilated into the mainstream in the U.S.A. but three of my interviewees realize that they are not accepted as Americans by the majority of Americans because their facial features are different from those of the majority of Americans. Even though all four of my interviewees said that they thought of themselves as Americans, sometimes they used plural "we," when they talked about Japanese people so maybe they have some feeling that they belong to a group which is Japanese. All four of my interviewees think that the English language is the most important factor to enable them to be assimilated into the American society.

Even though they were sent to an internment camp during World War II, their use of language was not changed. They used both English and Japanese in the camp. They used English in public and they used Japanese with their parents. After they left the camp, their language use, except Lily's, was not changed.

Today, all four of my interviewees feel more comfortable in English than Japanese. It is because they were educated for many years in English and were surrounded by English speaking people. Their opportunities to use English are much greater than their opportunities to use Japanese; in fact, their opportunities to use the Japanese language are limited. They use Japanese with their parents and with their wives who can't communicate well in English. In conclusion, from this project it is clear that all four second-generation Japanese-Americans are becoming monolingual in English.

Bibliography

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