The Significance of Language to Multiracial Individuals and to Their Identities, Part III

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Abstract
The goal of this multi-part paper is to create a framework towards understanding the relationship of language and identity in multiracial individuals. A bilingual person’s identity is defined by who he or she is through social interaction with others, through how they are categorized and understood by others, and possibly through how much a person may or may not internalize the views of others. As the main focus of this third section of their multi-part paper, the authors examine issues of bilingualism in multiracial individuals in one particular set of such individuals. In particular, they devote this section to discussing the bilingual experiences of AmerAsians in Okinawa, which highlights how bilingualism and biculturality affect such individuals in terms of both their opportunities in society, their perceptions of the world, and their own identities. The role of language is vital to a multiracial individual’s identity because it is a central component in social relationships, allowing access to cultural knowledge and behavior of ethnic groups; and further, how it influences the bicultural, bilingual individual’s capabilities to negotiate the sense of self and acceptance into a group or society.

Key words: bilingual, multiracial identity, multilingualism, bilingual identity, identity development

Note: The following article is the third part of multiple-part research paper. The first part was presented at The Asian Conference on Education Conference, held Oct 24-29, 2012, in Osaka, Japan, and the second part was published in the 2015 Kitasato Kiyo.

Introduction
The processes involved in identity formation for multiracial individuals form a complex set of
patterns since a multitude of personal and social factors such as the family, immediate social context, geographic location, the individual’s physical appearance, the school and educational environment, the person’s peers, the individual’s language capabilities, gender, and social class come to play a role in how a multiracial person identifies himself or herself racially, ethnically and culturally. Neither do these factors influence all biracial or multiracial people uniformly. Each individual is born into and grows up in a set of unique conditions, so it is extremely difficult to generalize and approximate how much of single or multiple factors will be critical to the individual. All of these factors are influential in the processes of identity formation of any individual regardless of whether they are multiracial or of a single race. Nevertheless, it is important to identify some of the factors that are significant in determining how a multiracial individual self-identifies and how he or she comes to terms with definition of self as bilingual and bicultural. In this third part of our paper on the significance of language to multiracial individuals and to their identities, we focus our attention on a special category of biracial, bicultural individuals found on the island of Okinawa, Japan. By addressing the situation, needs, and concerns of this group of multicultural and multilingual individuals, the authors hope to shed further light on the role that dual language development plays in the lives of a significant population of bilinguals who reside in Japan.

Examining Issues of Bilingualism in Multiracial Individuals

There are many groups and individuals of multiracial people around the world whose use of two languages is especially important to their lives and to the development of their identities (Hud-Aleem & Countryman, 2008; Schwartz, 1998a). AmeriAsians in Japan are an example of a group of people where language may be a crucial component to how they experience being a biracial person of American (or Canadian) and Japanese heritage (Knight, 2001). By discussing in particular the experiences of AmerAsians in Okinawa, this section will highlight how bi/multilinguality and bi/multiculturality might affect a person in terms of both their opportunities in society, perceptions of the world, and in terms of their own identity (Clement & Noels, 1992; Murphy-Shigematsu, 1997). The complexity of outcomes and circumstances that are related to multiple linguistic, cultural, and ethnic heritages and the connection to the identity of a multiracial people should be recognized (Sims, 2000; Wallace, 2004). There is no model that can simply determine or predict what kinds of factors in a person’s life will be most influential in how a person will feel about himself or herself, and how these factors will determine a multiracial individual’s life (Liebkind, 1997; Kich, 1992). Each person’s experience will be unique, different, and situated according to various factors and circumstances in his or her life (Chavez & Guido-DiBrito, 1999). Obviously, there are many multiracial individuals who do not choose to become bilingual or do not have the opportunity to acquire adequate facility in a second...
language. Yet for some sets of multicultural individuals, dual language acquisition is vital to the multiracial individual’s identity because it is a central component in social relationships, allows access to cultural knowledge and the behavior of ethnic heritage groups, and to a large degree, influences the individual’s capabilities to negotiate their sense of self and acceptance into social groups or societies (Cauce, et al., 1992; Brooks, 2012). It is on this latter type of multiracial, multilingual individual that we have focused our research investigation.

We want to argue that the opportunities to acquire both languages will help to balance a sense of self between the two cultures and distinct social groups in some point of their lives of multilingual individuals (Pavlenko, 2006; Byrd Clark & Lamoureux, 2014). Achieving this balance often occurs for multilingual individuals during their adolescence or later during adulthood, a period in which access is often blocked to the language learning competencies of their dual heritages. It is a process that is likely to be disruptive and, at times, detrimental to the individual’s sense of self because it can weaken the individual’s ability to function or survive, even in a single social system (UNESCO, 2009; Garcia, 2009). Without the linguistic competence to successfully navigate himself or herself through linguistically different worlds — much less a single world, AmerAsian individuals, who are already facing difficult social and economic circumstances, are further placed into a position where they are unable to fit into either of their linguistic heritage groups or into the larger societies. The challenge then for such multicultural individuals is to find ways to educate and foster growth and civic development for AmerAsian individuals that are multilingually and multiculturally sound so that they can be empowered to be who they are and to be accepted for who they are in both their single cultural milieu and in their multi-cultural contexts (Edwards, 1994; Murphy-Shigematsu, 2001).

The Case of Bilingual AmerAsians in Okinawa

The islands of Okinawa were occupied by the United States at the end of the Second World War, and remained occupied by the United States armed forces until 1972 when the islands were returned to the Japanese government (Murphy-Shigematsu, 1997). The economy, politics, the people, the land, and the culture of Okinawa have all been affected immeasurably by the events of the Second World War and the fifty-years of US military presence that has followed. Currently, there are approximately 30,000 U.S. military personnel stationed on Okinawa, while 75% of all habitable land within the Okinawan archipelago is occupied by or affiliated with the US military (Amerajian, Volume 1). This continuous presence of American military soldiers and personnel has resulted in a large number of multiracial children born between Americans servicemen and Japanese women (Murphy-Shigematsu, 1986).

These children, usually born between an American father and mother of the native Okinawan
population, are called “AmerAsians.” In the majority of Okinawan cases, the father is a man that works or is stationed on one of the numerous American bases, while the mother is a Japanese woman from Okinawa. These “American-Asian” children are by no means an isolated group that only exists in Okinawa. Many AmerAsian children exist in countries such as Vietnam, The Philippines, and Korea, countries that have been or are currently involved with an American military presence in their nation. There are other AmerAsian children within Japan but they do not exist in as large numbers as in Okinawa, which has the highest number of marriages between Japanese nationals and foreigners when compared nationwide (Amerajian, Volume 1). In addition, 75% of all American Base facilities in Japan are located in Okinawa, meaning it has the largest number of military personnel stationed in any one area. Estimates report that there are currently about 3000 to 4000 AmerAsian individuals within Okinawa (Amerajian, Volume 1).

This group of biracial and often bilingual AmerAsians face many difficult circumstances as being people of more than one racial, social, and cultural heritage (Lewis, Sanjines, & Weiner, 2011; Otani, 2009). They are often marginalized in Japanese society because of their circumstances as marked individuals who are half American — the aggressors in the Second World War who invaded the island of Okinawa and continue to occupy it — and as members of the lower class since many of the American fathers from the bases have abandoned them; these biracial people do not have the same educational and social opportunities as the rest of society (Miyahira & Petrucci, 2007; Koshiro, 1999).

First, they face social stigma and negative attitudes from being AmerAsian. Due to the social and historical background of Okinawa as being a battleground for the Second World War and since it was occupied by the United States for nearly three decades, many people on the islands of Okinawa have strong negative sentiments towards the Americans and anyone resembling an American (Amerajian, Volume 2; Johnston, 2013). As a result, the AmerAsians are marginalized and experience prejudice in areas such as school or the workplace. Second, many AmerAsian children and their families suffer from poverty due in part to their situation as single-parent families (Tsuneyoshi, Okano, & Boocock, 2011; Ponterotto, Utsey & Pederson, 2006). When the American husband is part of the American
armed forces, there is a source of stable income; the family is provided housing and health care, and the children can be educated in the American public school system that is on the premises of the US military bases. However, when a couple is separated through divorce, death, or abandonment, the family loses these privileges in housing, health care, and education that had previously been provided through the husband’s military service (Anderson, Bulatao, & Cohen, 2004). Subsequently, the Japanese mother is usually left to support the children on her own (Hornbuckle, 1999). Finally, AmerAsians do not have access to education that permits them to learn languages of both their ethnic heritages. When an AmerAsian child lives on the American military base or has lived in the United States for a large portion of their lives, they may not have had the opportunity to learn Japanese. However, when a family is separated through divorce, death, or abandonment, it is often the case that the children will live with their mothers who return to Okinawan society.

The AmerAsian children then are expected to become a part of Japanese society, to be educated in Japanese schools, but they often are unable to have a meaningful and successful education. These individuals do not have opportunities to learn Japanese as a second language because Japanese schools are not equipped to teach Japanese as second language in this manner. Nor can the schools meet the demands of AmerAsians to maintain or develop their English language skills (Hornbuckle, 1999). If they attend a Japanese pubic school, these AmerAsians often struggle because they have never been educated in a curriculum that is completely in Japanese, and are left with very little language and academic support. AmerAsian children in these circumstances have a slim chance to enter either Japanese or American universities. Even if parents of these AmerAsian children wanted to provide them with an education that can support and foster both the Japanese and American linguistic and cultural facets of their children, schools which aim to do so by providing bilingual curriculum are inaccessible to most people in Japanese society (Okano & Tsuneyoshi, 2011). Needless to say, such a type of education is nearly impossible for AmerAsian families who struggle financially because these schools are enormously expensive (Amerajian, Volume 1). AmerAsians who have lived in Japanese society and have been educated primarily in Japanese will also struggle if and when they move to the United States, and are forced to adjust to American English-speaking society (Nakane, Otsuji, & Armour, 2015).

A group of parents of AmerAsian children in Okinawa of Japan became politically active, intensively lobbied for the rights of AmerAsians, and then opened up a small school in 1998 to provide educational opportunities for these multiracial children of American and Japanese descent. The AmerAsian School in Okinawa was built primarily for the goal of educating multiracial AmerAsian children as bilinguals and bicultural “doubles” (AmeriAsian School in Okinawa homepage, 2001). The school provides a small number of students with language instruction in both English and Japanese, acts as a community for AmerAsian students and their families, and plans cultural events so that the
students can socialize with members of both American and Japanese society (Amerijan, Volume 1). The school atmosphere affirms the students’ identities as “doubles” and actively seeks to educate and advance its students towards this goal. It is important to recognize the essential need for and to support the goal of this school to foster positive identities for multiracial children and to provide its students the opportunities to access their cultural, social, and linguistic heritages (Cunico, 2009). The education and development of an individual as a “double” has the capability to counter social marginalization (Pitt, 2011). Moreover, it represents the choice and the freedom for multiracials to be who they want to be and possibly reach their potential as individuals of unique multilingual backgrounds (Burgess, 2012).

This is one particular example of how language can be vital for a group of multiracial people in Okinawa. It represents how language can impact a multiracial person’s ability to fit into and be a part of society, and how there are educational challenges in providing such individuals with opportunities to maintain and further develop multilingual and multicultural abilities (Fantini, 2012; Hatori, 2005). Simultaneously, language also symbolizes their identity as multiracial, multicultural and bilingual people (Chisholm, 1994). Denying access to or not acknowledging their needs of learning both English and Japanese — which can help them to gain access to their cultural heritages and social relationships in society that they live in — is a process of denying these peoples’ identities and can have dire consequences (Yoshida & Oikawa, 2012). We believe that the identities of multiracial individuals in Okinawa, who desire to lead bicultural and bilingual lives, will be impacted by the degree to which they acquire both English and Japanese (Otani, 2009; Thorpe, 2013).

Many of these AmerAsian students do not always have the opportunity to be a part of the Japanese-speaking society; nor can they be a part of an English-speaking American culture or society if they do not have the adequate language capabilities and a certain degree of bicultural competency (Oikawa & Yoshida, 2007). If they become a marginalized group of people in Okinawa, they could also be marginalized upon returning to the United States (Oshima, 2014). Future research should be conducted to explore how language relates to educational and occupational outcomes and to the identities and concepts of the self among AmerAsians in Okinawa. Additional educational initiatives are needed to improve the plight of AmerAsian children who lack a place in the society to learn and build a healthy and positive sense of self (Okano, 2008; Sims, 2000).

**Conclusion to Part III**

The goal of the entire multi-part paper has been to further develop a framework towards understanding the relationship of language and identity in multiracial and multiethnic individuals. In particular, in the third part of our paper, we have examined the case of AmeriAsian individuals in Okinawa who are multiracial and often bilingual. This third part of our multi-part paper has examined
the pertinent issues related to the bilingualism of the multiracial individuals, specifically those in Okinawa, Japan, who sometimes face difficult circumstances as being people of more than one racial, social, and cultural heritage. In not all cases but in some, they have been marginalized in Japanese society because of their circumstances as individuals who are half American (or other foreign nationality), and often as members of the lower economic class. This group of biracial people does not always have access to the same educational and social opportunities as the rest of Japanese society. The authors believe that the question of how language and identity interrelate is important to not only multiracial and multiethnic individuals, but is significant as well to the members of educational institutions, social organizations, and companies in which multiracial and multiethnic individuals learn and work. It is especially relevant to examine these issues as they relate to a specific group of such individuals located in Japan, where the authors have spent much of their lives. The authors hope the current framework and further research in the future will not only address issues that are pertinent to multiracial and multiethnic individuals, but will also capture the experiences and issues relating to the role language and the development of identities of a much larger audience.

Future research to construct a more holistic framework should further examine how a multiracial or multiethnic individual’s identity transforms over time and should consider, from various angles and with different methodologies, how and to what extent language is significant in a multiracial or multiethnic person’s identity. Such research should also attempt to document specific cases of multiracial or multiethnic people where language is highly relevant and vital to their identities.

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要旨

多人種的バックグラウンドを持つ人々の アイデンティティに対する言語の重要性（Part Ⅲ）

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本論文の目的は多人種（multiracial）の人々にとって言語とアイデンティティがどのような
関係にあるのかを検討するための枠組みを形づくることである。

二言語使用者（bilingual）のアイデンティティは他人との社会的交流、他人による自己カテゴ
リ化、他人の態度や視点の内面化の有無によって形成されると考えられている。第一部に当た
る本稿では沖縄県のアメリカン（AmerAsian）の言語的経験や歴史的背景を介してbilinguality
（二言語並存度）及びbiculturality（二文化併存度）がどのようにこのような人々の世界観やアイ
デンティティ、そして社会的機会や境遇に影響しているのかを考察する。言語は他人とのつな
がりや関係を築く上で不可欠であり、民族の文化的知識や行動規範などの習得に直接関わる。言
語は特に多人種（multiracial）のアイデンティティ形成過程において重要な役割を担い、個々人
が二言語並存的、二文化併存的に自己を確立し、同時に特定の集団や社会の一員として受け入れ
られることに対しても影響する。

キーワード：二言語使用者、多民族の同一性、他言語使用、二言語使用者のアイデンティティ、
アイデンティティの発達