CHAPTER 4

Language, Culture and Ethnicity:
A case of Japanese mixed heritage youths in Canada

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Introduction

One of the most common questions that mixed heritage people encounter daily is "What are you?" It is also the question that inspired Kip Fulbeck, a professor at the University of California Santa Barbara to embark on the hapa project and publish the book called *Part Asian, 100% Hapa* (Fulbeck, 2006). Fulbeck himself is a hapa, a Hawaiian word meaning mixed heritage person. For his book, he gathered over 1200 self-identified hapas' photos accompanied with a handwritten response to the question: "what are you?" The following are some of responses:

> What am I? Shouldn't you be telling me that? People tell me I'm white because I "look white." But then others say they can see the Japanese in me after I tell them. They say, "oh, I can see it in your eyes." Where does that leave me? No one questions my father's race or ethnicity. But suddenly, one generation later, I'm not "Asian." (146)

> I am millions of particles fused together making up a far less than perfect masterpiece. I am the big bang. (164)

> I am many little bridges joined. My parents and grandparents have many stories of making paths, and following paths, and crossing paths. I come from whalers, trappers, adventures, nomads --- all trails led to a point: me. (78)

> What am I? I'm exactly the same as every other person in 2500. (24)

The responses echo the voices of the Japanese mixed heritage youths (hereafter JMHY) whom I interviewed for my dissertation research. As a language teacher, I have modified the question so as to understand how they perceive their ethnicity and who they are as language learners. Fourteen JMHY spent some time with me to share their life stories and assisted me to find the answers to the questions. The quoted responses above, even within a concise sentence, suggest the complexity of their sense of ethnicity, which does not

simply merge from the cross over between Japan and Canada. Their words indicate that the complexity is produced from the intersection of past, present and future, the tension between denial and acceptance, and uncertainty around their own perception of themselves and the perceptions of others. In this paper I present the short summary of my dissertation, also my long journey with fourteen JMHY participants with the hope of illustrating what appears to be a common theme among them. It should be noted that what I present here is my analysis or interpretation of the JMHY's life stories, which may represent only one dimension of factors about their lives (Freeland 2006; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007).

Background of the Study

A society that consists of many immigrants such as Canada not only becomes a multicultural society, but also many of its households become intercultural or multicultural. The data from Census Statistics Canada (2006) released in 2010[1] reported that the proportion of interracial couples in Canada is on the rise, with a third more than in the previous census taken in 2001. Among numerous ethnic groups in Canada, Japanese reportedly have the highest ratio of interracial couples. According to the report, there are 29,700 interracial couples of which three-quarters (74.6%) have one partner who originates from Japan. This percentage is remarkably high in comparison to the second largest group (47%), which is made up of Latin American and non-Latin American partners. The report explains that this high proportion may be due to the long residential history for many Japanese in Canada, as well as the low overall number of Japanese, which may have led to an increase in interaction with persons outside of their group.

This census report confirms my own observations. In my experience teaching Japanese as a second language (JSL) in university over the last ten years, I have noticed an increased enrolment of JMHY studying Japanese. The majority of the JMHY in my class start from the beginner's class as a result of not having attended formal Japanese language class previously. When JMHY claim their Japanese heritage background as the reason for studying Japanese, over other university language courses such as French, German or Chinese, this raises issues in terms of how they relate to JSL students. How are they different from JSL learners? At the same time, how do they differ from heritage language (HL) learners with parents from the same cultural background? Most importantly, how

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[1] *The census is conducted every five years and it takes several years before the public sees its results. The latest census took place in 2011, the results of which were released only partially, by the time I wrote this dissertation in December, 2013.*

can a Japanese language instructor best respond to JMHY's needs as learners in a JSL class? In effect, we researchers have not investigated this segment of the population enough to answer these questions. Mixed heritage persons have not received adequate attention in HL studies (Noro, 2009; Shin, 2010), although in the fields of psychology and cultural studies scholars have conducted a great volume of research on mixed heritage persons and have analyzed their ethnicity (e.g., Bettez, 2010; Collins, 2000; Murphy-Shigematsu, 2000; Root, 1997). I consider this to be one of the research gaps in HL education and in fact there is another one I identify, which is explained below.

In the HL field, since Fishman's (1966) pioneering work, the importance of maintaining the HL of immigrants has been continuously promoted and studied in various contexts. While the work of Cummins (1979, 1991, 2000) emphasizes the cognitive and academic developmental benefits of retaining the first language of any immigrant, a large body of research (e.g., Cho & Krashen, 2003; Luo & Wiseman, 2000; Wong, 1991) has shown that one of the personal benefits of language maintenance is to improve family relationships. In the Japanese heritage language (JHL) context, the main trend is in line with the rest of HL education, and many studies (e.g., Hayashi, 2006; Oketani, 1997; Sakamoto, 2006; Shibata, 2003) have documented the importance of the retention of JHL and have investigated key factors for HL maintenance in North America. Thus, the benefits of maintaining one's HL are well documented. The flip side of this story is not so celebratory: there is a negative view of those who cannot manage to retain their HL. They are not only perceived as disadvantaged, but are also often placed outside the scope of HL research.

Because research focused solely on mixed heritage persons is extremely limited in HL studies, I have designed my research to address this gap. I see an urgent need to investigate an appropriate pedagogical approach for the JMHY in my classes and those in JSL classes elsewhere. I used the following research questions to shape my study:

Q 1: How is the sense of ethnicity of JMHY shaped by culture in their everyday lives, and what role does their heritage language, Japanese, play in this process?

Q 2: What are the implications of JMHY's lack of "linguistic proficiency" in Japanese in the post-secondary Japanese language classroom?

Theoretical framework

With regard to the first research question, the main concern is to gain a better understanding of who JMHY are. In HL research, this question is often rendered as an investigation of learner's sense of belonging, identity or ethnicity. Instead, drawing on Baumann (1996) who approaches "ethnicity as culture," this study considers that it is JMHY culture that shapes their sense of belonging, identity and the role of HL in that process. Therefore, to examine who JMHY are requires an investigation of JMHY culture, which assists me to comprehend two interrelated processes: how JMHY culture shapes the relationship between heritage language and ethnicity, and at the same time how their view of heritage language and ethnicity reshape JMHY culture (Baumann, 1996).

Investigating ethnicity as culture inevitably leads to the question of how "culture" could be defined. In the era of postmodernism and post-structuralism, scholars like Rampton (1995) and Harris (2006) who support Hall's (1989, 1991, 1992) anti-essential approach to culture claim that a rigid essential view of culture does not adequately explain the relation between language and ethnicity. On the other hand, those who suggest an indexical link between language and ethnicity (e.g., Edwards, 2009; May, 2005), point out the danger of completely dismissing an essentialised view of culture. My take on culture is grounded in Baumann's notion, which does not see essentialised and non-essentialised views as oppositional but posits "two cultural discourses." He explains the significance of this approach in the following manner:

> We have a lot to gain as soon as we theorize what people say and do about culture as two discourses, both of them rational in their different contexts. It opens up a whole new universe of study. By viewing culture as the object of two discursive competencies, one essentialist and one processual, we can study and appreciate the culture-making sophistication of exactly those people who are usually treated as the dupes of "their" reified cultures. (Baumann, 1999, 94)

The notion of two cultural discourses sets up the core theoretical framework for the study, which aims to gain understanding of JMHY's sense of ethnicity from their cultural perspective. To investigate JMHY's ethnicity, I pay particular attention to the meaning making process, as Street (1993) suggests that we should study culture as an action, not a thing, because the most important aspect of culture making is that it is an active process of meaning making.

For my second research question, the focus is shifted to JMHY's linguistic competency, so I investigated JMHY culture as a question of who they are as language learners. Since a conventional language test or questionnaire labels them as a beginner of Japanese, their linguistic competency has to be examined from a different perspective. This study found Byram's intercultural competence (1997, 2000, 2012) that emphasizes critical cultural awareness useful to examine JMHY's communication competence. Byram suggests that recognizing cultural differences does not necessary divide "our" and 'their" culture, but it could work both as a tool to bridge the differences and an analytical lens to see differences within a culture. One of the benefits in employing this perspective is that it creates distance from the comparison with a native speaker of Japanese as it is not necessarily present in native speakers.

Secondly, Cook's (1991, 1992, 2005, 2011) multicompetence theory is used to scrutinize the JMHY's use of Japanese words or phrases in English. Like intercultural competence, Cook explains that multicompetence is not equivalent to two monolinguals but is a unique combination that is not present in a native speaker. Thus, multicompetent speakers can actively use more than one language for their own needs and their pattern of language use is deeply rooted in their daily life.

To sum up, the framework of the investigation of JMHY culture is supported by these four major theories. Among them I regard Baumann's two cultural discourses as a key as it underlines the other three theories. For this study, I consider that essentialised and non-essentialised views of culture are not oppositional but both are a process of cultural making.

Method

Gaining a better understanding of JMHY culture is aided by an ethnography approach. Among various ethnographic approaches, I employed linguistic ethnography promoted by Hymes (1980, 1996, 2010) because the aim of this study is most appropriately accommodated by his propositions for the study of language on three points. First of all, Hymes suggests the duty of an ethnographer is that he or she "must begin, not with the function of language in culture, but the functions of languages in cultures" (Hymes, 2010, p. 577). His claim applies suitably to this present investigation of youth who do not demonstrate an advanced linguistic proficiency in their HL. Outsiders who do not share the same cultural code may not recognize any functions of JMHY's non-verbalized behaviours, but there could be an important function in these behaviours for those who share the same cultural code.

Secondly, in line with Baumann's notion of "ethnicity as culture," Hymes insists what makes us who we are is not our age, sex, race, class or occupation but our daily experience, including daily language use. Our experience makes connections between language and social life, and only that realization allows us to study the functions of languages. This is an important starting point of this study, as the study takes on Baumann's notion of "ethnicity as culture" and explores the daily language use of JMHY whose group is formed not based on a shared sense of ethnicity but of culture.

The third point is the similarity lying in the concept of intercultural competence and multicompetence. Like Hymes' ethnography of communication (Hymes, 1974), both intercultural competence and multicompetence focus on communicative competence and reject the view of communication as simply an exchange of information. In this sense, I believe that linguistic ethnography provides the most suitable methodology for investigating JMHY daily interactions from the perspectives of intercultural competence and multicompetence.

Participants and Analysis

I recruited fourteen participants from seven families (four males and ten females), who met all the following criteria:

- Be between 18 – 30 years of age
- Have one first generation Japanese parent (born and raised in Japan) and have one Canadian parent (born and raised in Canada)
- Have grown up (or have spent significant time) in Canada
- Speak English fluently

I interviewed all of them at least once, but four of them were not available for the second interview. Apart from the interviews, I collected and analyzed six self-reflected life essays, several photos from eight participants, my brief field notes when I had a chance to observe their interactions with their parents or siblings, and emails that I exchanged with them.

As ethnographic research is generally structured around researchers' subjective stances, or their epistemological and ontological stances, how we deal with these positions determines the credibility of the analysis process (Heller, 2008). In my attempt to make sense of the data, I could not help but notice that I was juxtaposing the JMHY's life stories with my own personal experience. As a result, it was inevitable that my personal life history, and even my moods were all incorporated into the analysis. Creese and Blackledge (2012) metaphorically

describe this phenomenon: "as we tell our stories in the voices of others inevitably we perform them, speaking in and through the words of our characters" (p. 318).

Also when we consider researchers' subjective stance in relation to participants, one important question to be asked is whether a researcher is an insider or outsider in relation to the group of participants. Initially, I consider myself as an outsider to the participants, but at some points I realized I was not a complete outsider to them. Because of their mixed heritage background, my assumption was that their sense of being Japanese could not have been the same as mine. However, there were some cases where I had to ask myself consciously: "is it really different?" This encounter led me to the realization that it was not the participants who considered me as an outsider, but I myself categorized JMHY as non-Japanese and thus regarded myself as an outsider to JMHY. Inevitably, my assumption had to be reshaped[2] (Shao-Kobayashi, 2014), and I took into consideration that our experience or meaning making process might have a common ground regardless of how different we were from each other in terms of our personal backgrounds. I began to make an intentional comparison between participants' understanding of who is Japanese and my understanding of who is Japanese.

Findings

In this section I describe the results of the study, but due to the limited space of this book, only the condensed summary of the findings are presented here. To review a full discussion of the findings and analyses including interview excerpts, please refer to my dissertation that is available at the library of Simon Fraser University, Canada.

The first three findings are responding to the first research question, which focuses more on the relation between language and the sense of ethnicity. First I noticed that many participants used the term "half Japanese" to describe their ethnicity. They use that term to distinguish themselves from people who can speak Japanese and to emphasize the difference from them. In this regard, the lack of Japanese proficiency closely related to their sense of ethnicity, indexical link between language and ethnicity (May, 2005). However, when it comes

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[2] *This was my assumption but at the same time it is an important hypothesis that this study was structured on. As mentioned in the previous section and here, the research questions were formed on the premise that when people make sense of their experiences, they assign their own meanings to particular events. This foreground is not changed, but the change is in accepting the possibility that the JMHY may have the same sense of being Japanese as I, or any Japanese who was born and raised inside Japan.*

to the Japanese language itself, the participants call it "my culture" or "part of my heritage" to indicate the closeness to Japanese heritage. Thus, "half Japanese" doesn't mean they have half of everything Japanese people have, but it's their acknowledgement of the other half, which they cannot separate from their Japanese halfness. While many participants see Japanese language proficiency as separating them from "Japanese people," they do not think gaining full linguistic proficiency will completely wipe out their other half. For example, Stacy—who exhibits a strong desire to obtain an advanced level of Japanese—believes she will be a very Canadianized-Japanese person, even if one day she becomes fluent in Japanese. Another participant, Holly, who claims to be an intermediate speaker and says that she has two different mindsets, describes the sense of being not "half" but "double".

The second finding is the ways the JMHY assure or are assured of their Japanese heritage. As discussed already, the lack of Japanese language proficiency makes JMHY's sense of being Japanese more vulnerable than their sense of being Canadian and as a result they feel a need to assure their connection to Japanese heritage. Interestingly, while some JMHY clearly distinguish themselves from "Japanese people" who are speakers of Japanese in their eyes, the presence of their Japanese parent seems to assert for JMHY participants their origin or roots, where they came from (Hall, 1996). Several of them claim that they feel more Japanese simply when they are with their Japanese parent or Japanese side of family members. Similarly, they try to cling to the tradition or reconnect to the past to assure their Japanese connection. A good example is the choice of tattoo. One of the female participants has the most well-known origami figure of a crane on her shoulder; another participant (male) uses a Kanji (Chinese character) to write "friends" and "family" on his ankles. That is what Hiramoto (2014) calls "inked nostalgia" that has a value in the immigrant country but is not necessarily in line with native Japanese values. The JMHY's very action to maintain tradition represents a re-interpretation of "tradition" in their own right and context, thus reflecting their own meaning making (Street, 1993). Drawing on Baumann's two cultural discourses notion, here we can see evidence that the process of culture making involves essentialist rhetoric to reify Japanese traditional culture in JMHY's view while they are actively engaged in establishing their sense of ethnicity:

> Yet cultures, even in their most individualized practices, result also
> from validation of a past. Culture-making is not an ex *tempore*
> improvisation, but a project of social continuity placed with, and
> contending with, moments of social change. They reify cultures
> while at the same time making culture. (Baumann, 1996, p. 31)

For the third finding, I identified that a sense of loss or incompleteness influences the way the participants define their ethnicity and aspire to gain advanced Japanese proficiency. Not all participants feel a sense of loss stemming from the lack of Japanese proficiency, but those who show a strong desire to speak Japanese tend to believe they could feel fuller or more accepted as a Japanese by gaining Japanese proficiency. For example, Sachi is one of the participants who showed a desperate desire to speak Japanese, so her essay starts with, "the subject of language is, for me very much a subject of loss and recovery" and in the interview she said, "I started to tune into the fact that I was missing something. So I think on some level I felt the need to legitimatize myself by speaking Japanese." Those who indicate a strong desire to speak Japanese display a rather painful sense of loss or incompleteness. Although some previous studies describe a correlation between the level of HL and ethnicity, in my study I found that regardless of the level of HL proficiency, the sense of loss or incompleteness hinges on the way participants relate their ethnicity.

The next findings are responding to the second research question where JMHY are regarded as language learners, and the focus is on their linguistic competency. In this study I identified that JMHY show their intercultural competence in the absence of an advanced level of Japanese proficiency, and I found the following factors to be an important source of this competence. First, even though Japanese is not a mutual language used at home, JMHY observe how their parents interact in a cross-cultural situation. Many of the parents speak both Japanese and English and their interracial marriage is a great contributor to multiculturalism. JMHY notice the different communication styles between their parents, stemming from their different cultural backgrounds, but at the same time the participants' perception of their parents' communication style does not always follow a stereotype of Japanese or Canadian. Because their parents do not only provide a cross-cultural setting at home, but also act as models of intercultural speakers. The participants were able to recognize differences within both cultures as well.

The experience of JMHY as mixed heritage persons heightens their sensitivity to cultural boundaries and differences. However, for them, noticing a difference doesn't build a wall between two cultures; rather, they use their critical cultural awareness to bridge differences. Byram (1997) is not explicit about how intercultural competence could be gained without any linguistic competence, but he mentions that one of the conditions of intercultural competence is to be able to establish a good relationship among interlocutors. In the case of the JMHY participants, they cannot be intercultural speakers but intercultural mediators or listeners.

I also found that JMHY exhibit multicompetence in daily language use. I reiterate here what Cook (1991, 1992, 2005, 2011) tries to emphasize: that multicompetence is not equivalent to two monolinguals but is a unique combination that is not present in a native speaker. Thus, multicompetent speakers or in his words, "L2 users," can achieve different functions for their needs with more than one language. Among the participants the most commonly used Japanese is kinship terms and names of Japanese food. For example, Sachi uses three different languages to call her grandparents, her Japanese grandmother to whom she feels so close is "obachan," while her paternal side of grandmother is called "noni" in Italian. Sachi didn't develop a close relationship with either of her grandfathers, and they are normally referred to as "grandfather" in English. Using three different languages Sachi tried to covey the different level of intimacy she has developed with her grandparents.

Another factor that contributed to JMHY's multicompetence is the way they learned these Japanese words. Their use of Japanese is deeply rooted in their actual experience; they have learned the Japanese words through what Gee (2004) terms "cultural process." Joseph possesses an advanced level of Japanese, having gone to Japan regularly a summer time, but he has only a limited vocabulary related to winter events. Also, his family never celebrates Japanese New Year due to his family's religion, so—although he speaks fluent Japanese—his Japanese coworkers were surprised to find out Joseph didn't know what Oshougatu (Japanese New Year) means.

Conclusion

Even though the findings I have presented here are rather concise, it is hoped that these findings support and underscore the complexity in the JMHY's sense of ethnicity and the role of Japanese language in their daily life, namely JMHY culture. Their daily experience, including their daily language usage, helps them form JMHY culture, and at the same time their culture assists the functions of their language use. A conventional language examination simply sends them to a beginner's class, but with a close look at their language use, this study highlights their communicative competence, such as intercultural competency and multicompetence. These competencies are the result of their unique "cultural process" (Gee, 2004), which is deeply rooted in their daily lives. It would be helpful if language instructors acknowledge such a process and create a curriculum that strengthens such communicative competences. For example, adopting a more individualized curriculum would help to evaluate JMHY's learning process. Also to support such a learning process, the use of

content-based learning might be a more appropriate approach. In this regard, studying in Japan could be a good option. However, studying abroad involves a different interaction with Japanese people, which this study did not explore. More research is needed to confirm the effect of a study abroad program for JMHY. I consider that would be an interesting direction to take for my future research.

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