Research Paper

A Survey on Perception of “Bilinguals”: What the Results Imply

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In order to investigate how bilingualism is generally perceived in Japan, a questionnaire survey was conducted with 144 university students. Three main points became clear from the survey results: 1) “bilinguals” are generally given relatively positive images; 2) “bilingual” is defined relatively strictly, with bilinguals being expected to have a rather good command of at least the speaking and listening skills in both languages, preferably all four skills; and 3) to most subjects, “bilingual” means a speaker of Japanese and English, but not a speaker of other languages.

Key words: bilingualism, attitudes, Japanese-English bilinguals, minority languages, perception survey

『バイリンガル』に対する意識調査：その結果が意味するところ

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日本においてバイリンガリズムがどのように受けとめられているかを調査するために、大学生144名を対象としたアンケート調査（集計調査）を実施した。調査結果から次の3点が明らかとなった：1）「バイリンガル」は比較的肯定的なイメージで捉えられている；2）「バイリンガル」の定義は比較的狭義に捉えられており、両言語について、少なくとも話したり聞いたりが流暢できる者であり、4技能すべてにおいて高い言語能力を持つ者であれば更によいと考えられている；3）多くの被験者にとって「バイリンガル」とは日本語－英語のバイリンガルを意味し、その他の言語の組み合わせによるバイリンガルは意識されていない。

キーワード：バイリンガリズム、態度、日本語－英語バイリンガル、少数言語、意識調査

1. Introduction

Japan has long been perceived and presented as a monolingual and ethnically homogeneous country by many mainstream Japanese. In 1986, Prime Minister Nakasone Yasuhiro even went as far as to claim that this characteristic was the determining factor in the Japanese educational superiority of Japanese over Americans, because American society has allegedly minority groups of “low intelligence,” such as Mexicans and Blacks (Asahi Shimbun, 24 September 1986). Domestically and abroad, Mr. Nakasone’s racist claim was rightly criticized by many people. It seems, however, that his assertion of Japanese social homogeneity and monolingualism went unchallenged by mainstream Japanese.

Aside from this ethnocentric opinion of one politician, quite a few Japanese scholars in linguistics-related fields also share this view of their own society (e.g., Toyama, 1974; Suzuki, 1975; Higuchi and Nakamura, 1978, Iritani, 1988). In sharp contrast, their counterparts abroad are more cautious about defining a monolingual nation (Trudgill, 1974; Grosjean, 1982) or in designating Japan as one (Harding and Riley, 1986).

Despite this self-view of Japanese society, Japan actually has never been a genuinely monolingual country (Maher and Yashiro, 1995). There have always existed several ethnic minority groups in Japan: indigenous Ainus, Koreans, Chinese and other “foreign” people, but issues such as the
recognition and the maintenance of their languages and ethnic identities have hardly been a subject among the Japanese majority.

Since around the middle of the 1980s, however, economic prosperity and scarcity in the domestic labor market have attracted people from abroad more than before, especially from Asian and South American countries. Added to the “old” groups of foreign residents above this influx of “new” minorities sharply increased the number of foreign residents in Japan (see Figure 1). In addition to these officially recognized foreign residents, it has been estimated that approximately 300,000 more are staying illegally (Ministry of Labor, 1995).

2. Bilinguals and language maintenance

2.1 Two fundamental subcategories of bilinguals

Two fundamental subcategories of bilinguals have been introduced by different researchers in different terms. The first category is termed elite (Skutnabb-Kangas, 1981) or elective bilingual (Valdés and Figueroa, 1994). Bilinguals comprising this category are generally "highly educated" (Skutnabb-Kangas, 1991; 97) and are "those individuals who choose to become bilingual and who seek out either formal classes or contexts in which they can acquire a foreign language ... and who continue to spend the greater part of their time in a society in which their first language is the majority or societal language" (Valdés and Figueroa, 1994: 12).

The second category of bilinguals, called folk (Skutnabb-Kangas, 1981) or circumstantial (Valdés and Figueroa, 1994), includes those who "must learn another language in order to survive" (Valdés and Figueroa, 1994: 12) and "have usually been forced to learn the other language" and "often come from a linguistic minority" (Skutnabb-Kangas, 1981: 97). Hereafter, in this paper, I will employ Skutnabb-Kangas’ terms, elite and folk.

2.2 Factors affecting the language maintenance/language shift of folk bilinguals

Do folk bilinguals maintain their mother tongues in a mainstream society whose primary language is different from theirs? Some do and some do not.

Analyzing the 1986 Australian national census, Clyne (1991) found that immigrants from Southern Europe maintain their mother tongues more than those from Northern Europe, and those from Eastern Europe more than those from Western Europe. Greek immigrants, for example, tend to maintain their mother tongue, with language shift occurring in only 4.4% of the first generation. Even among the second generation (of endogamous marriages) only 8.7% use English as the sole means of communication at home. Yugoslav immigrants also reveal a low shift to English, with only 9.5% of the first generation and 18% of the second (of endogamous marriages) using English as their sole home language. On the other hand, Dutch
immigrants show a greater tendency to shift to English, with 48.4% of the first generation and as many as 85.4% of the second generation (of endogamous marriages) of the Dutch immigrants using English as the sole home language.

Clyne (1991) suggests that cultural distance, including religion, is an important factor which affects the degree of language retention. Those who show great tendency to maintain "are either racially different or have distinctive religious affiliation, world-views and practices ... that distinguish them markedly from mainstream ones ... " (pp. 66-68).

A variety of other social, demographic, and linguistic factors have been suggested by other researchers (e.g., Conklin and Lourie, 1983; Giles, Bourhis and Taylor, 1977; Grosjean, 1982; Pauwels, 1991; Smolicz, 1981). Among them, the ones which are closely related to the present study are attitudes of the minority group toward their own language, along with the attitudes of the majority group toward the minority group (Grosjean, 1982). If the minority group has positive attitudes toward its own language, the group is more likely to try to maintain it. The minority group will also be more encouraged to retain their language if the majority group regards it positively.

Related further to those attitudinal factors, attitude toward the phenomenon of bilingualism itself may be a critical factor influencing the retention of the mother tongues. Folk bilinguals are often said to be evaluated negatively. According to Andersson and Boyer (1978), for example, "in California the label 'bilingual' may connote 'uneducated'" (p. 11). Likewise, Skutnabb-Kangas (1988) also notes that "[b]eing bilingual has in several countries, especially the United States, been used almost as a synonym for being poor, stupid and uneducated" (p. 12). This connotation seems to contrast sharply with that of elite bilinguals. Skutnabb-Kangas (1981) cites Fishman about French/English bilingualism in the United States:

If you have learnt French at university, preferably in France and even better at the Sorbonne, then bilingualism is something very positive. But if you have learnt French from your old grandmother in Maine, then bilingualism is something rather to be ashamed of. (p. 96)

It is not surprising that such negative attitudes toward folk bilinguals may have detrimental effects on the maintenance of their mother tongues.

3. Survey

Using a questionnaire survey, the present study tries to investigate whether certain attitudes toward bilingualism are detectable and whether those attitudes, if there are any, are associated with a particular bilingual group.

3.1 Subjects

The subjects of the study were students from two different universities, one in the Kansai area and the other in the Chubu area. Of the total 144 students, 100 (in the former university; female = 65, male = 35) were majoring in Letters and 44 (in the latter one; female = 2, male = 42) were majoring in Engineering.

3.2 Questionnaire and procedure

The subjects were provided with a short questionnaire and requested to answer each question, according to oral instructions given by the author. The survey was conducted in Japanese.

The questionnaire consists of two main sections: a section to determine the images held towards bilinguals and another section defining the term bilingual.

In the first part of the questionnaire, the subjects were instructed to list up to five images which may be evoked in their minds by the word "bilingual." After writing their responses, the subjects were asked to classify them as positive, negative or neutral.

In the second part, the subjects were presented with five definitions prepared by the author and requested to choose as many as they thought appropriate. After choosing, they were asked whether they would consider themselves bilingual or not, by those criteria.

Finally, respondents were given an unexpected question: they were asked to specify what language(s) they had had in mind when they were answering all the previous questions. In order to avoid contaminating the responses, the author was

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4. Results

4.1 Images held towards bilinguals

While various images were given, there were, as a whole, more positive images than negative ones. Of the total 607 resulting images, 362 (59.6%) were rated as positive, 179 (29.5%) as neutral, and only 66 (10.9%) as negative (see Figure 2).

Chi-square analysis showed that no significant differences in images were found either by gender \( (\chi^2 = 5.106, df = 2) \) or by academic major \( (\chi^2 = 2.366, df = 2) \) (see Figures 3 and 4).

Among the positive images, those most often given were related to being "international," "cool," or "smart." For the neutral images, being "international" and "foreign" were most commonly cited. Being "self-important" and "non-proficient in languages" were the most frequently mentioned of the negative images (see Table 1).

### Table 1: Positive/neutral/negative images cited by the subjects

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total n = 607</th>
<th>Images related with (being)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive images</td>
<td>International (Kokusei) 49 (13.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cool (Kakkoi) 31 (8.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Smart (Kashiko) 30 (8.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>English (Eigo) 18 (5.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Enuitable (Urayamashi) 16 (4.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Awesome (Sugoi) 10 (2.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Translator (Tsuyaku) 10 (2.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Others 198 (54.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral images</td>
<td>International (Kokusei) 29 (16.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Foreignness (Gekoku) 10 (5.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female (Jojo) 7 (3.9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>English (Eigo) 6 (3.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Others 127 (70.9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative images</td>
<td>Self-important (Erasso) 5 (7.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cold (Tumata) 3 (4.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Non-proficient in Japanese 3 (4.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Non-proficient in both languages 3 (4.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Others 6 (3.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Others 50 (75.8%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The italicized words in parentheses are romanized Japanese. Synonymous variations are combined into categories.

### 4.2 Definitions of bilingual

Table 2 below is a matrix in which each definition allocates levels of proficiency in the four skills in two languages. Among the five definitions presented to the subjects (see Table 2), Definition 1 presents the narrowest definition of bilingual, as

### Table 2: A matrix of levels of the four skills in two languages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skills</th>
<th>Speaking</th>
<th>Listening</th>
<th>Writing</th>
<th>Reading</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Definitions</td>
<td>L1</td>
<td>L2</td>
<td>L1</td>
<td>L2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Five definitions of bilingual were presented to the subjects as follows:

1. a person who possesses abilities in all four skills (speaking, listening, writing and reading) in two languages equivalent to the skills of native speakers of each language;
2. not as proficient as the person described in "1," but who can communicate well enough in daily life in both languages;
3. a person who is competent in all four skills (speaking, listening, writing and reading) in one language while proficient only enough to greet in the other language;
4. a person who can neither write nor read in either language but who can speak and listen in both;
5. a person who can neither write nor read in either language, nor speak in one of the languages, but who can orally comprehend in both languages.

O = as proficient as native speakers
O = proficient but less than O
O = proficient (proficiency level not mentioned)
□ = incipient
Blank = incapable
being natively proficient in all four skills. Definition 2 is less strict, allowing a person to be less competent but nevertheless proficient in all four skills in both languages to be included. People covered by Definition 3 are more likely to be essentially monolingual but with an incipient command of another language. Literacy is not required according to Definitions 4 and 5: Definition 4 requires oral productive abilities in both languages, but Definition 5 allows a monolingual speaker to be considered bilingual as long as s/he is capable of comprehension in both languages.

The results are found in Table 3 and also in Figures 5, 6, and 7.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Definitions chosen</th>
<th>All the subjects n = 144</th>
<th>Female n = 67</th>
<th>Male n = 77</th>
<th>Letters n = 100</th>
<th>Engineering n = 44</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>33 (22.9%)</td>
<td>21 (31.3%)</td>
<td>12 (15.6%)</td>
<td>32 (32.0%)</td>
<td>1 (2.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/2</td>
<td>53 (38.8%)</td>
<td>24 (35.8%)</td>
<td>29 (37.7%)</td>
<td>34 (34.0%)</td>
<td>19 (43.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/4</td>
<td>31 (21.5%)</td>
<td>7 (10.4%)</td>
<td>24 (31.2%)</td>
<td>9 (9.0%)</td>
<td>22 (50.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/4/5</td>
<td>3 (2.1%)</td>
<td>1 (1.5%)</td>
<td>2 (1.3%)</td>
<td>2 (2.0%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>12 (8.3%)</td>
<td>8 (11.9%)</td>
<td>4 (5.2%)</td>
<td>12 (12.0%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2/3</td>
<td>1 (0.7%)</td>
<td>1 (1.5%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>1 (1.0%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2/4</td>
<td>7 (4.9%)</td>
<td>3 (4.5%)</td>
<td>4 (5.2%)</td>
<td>5 (5.0%)</td>
<td>2 (4.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>1 (0.7%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>1 (1.3%)</td>
<td>1 (1.0%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>1 (0.7%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>1 (1.3%)</td>
<td>1 (1.0%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The female subjects have a tendency to define bilingual more strictly than the male subjects, and fewer female subjects accept non-literates, even ones with oral capabilities in both languages, as bilingual. However, the difference in response between the female subjects and male subjects was not statistically significant (χ² = 16.443, df = 9).

A significant difference was found between the subjects majoring in Letters and those majoring in Engineering (χ² = 45.155, df = 9, p < 0.001). While the proportion of subjects who admitted both Definition 1 and Definition 2 is roughly comparable for both majors (Letters: 34.0%, n = 34; Engineering: 43.2%, n = 19), the number who limit bilinguals to Definition 1 only is vastly greater among the subjects majoring in Letters (Letters: 32.0%, n = 32; Engineering: 2.3%, n = 1).
4.3 Self-evaluation: bilingual or not

Based on the definition(s) they chose, the subjects were requested to judge if they themselves are bilingual or not. Only 6.3% (n = 9) of the subjects judged themselves bilingual (see Figure 8).

![Figure 8: Self-evaluation results, sorted by the definition(s) chosen by each subject](image)

The results indicate that self-evaluation of bilingual abilities is statistically independent of sex ($\chi^2 = 2.213, df = 1$) and academic major ($\chi^2 = 2.770, df = 1$) (see Figures 9 and 10).

![Figure 9: Self-evaluation results, sorted by sex](image)

![Figure 10: Self-evaluation results, sorted by major](image)

An examination of the definitions chosen by those nine subjects evaluating themselves as bilingual revealed an interesting point. All nine subjects included either Definition 1 or 2 (or both), but four out of the five Engineering students also included Definition 4. Among the four subjects majoring in Letters, only one accepted the definitions with the bi-illiterate feature, Definitions 4 and 5. The remaining three accepted only Definitions 1 and/or 2.

Since the sample size is small and it is impossible to know specifically which one of the selected definitions was the basis for their self-judgments, the following is mere speculation, but the bilingual Letters majors seem to have evaluated their bilingual abilities more strictly than the Engineering majors did. It is not particularly surprising that students majoring in Letters are likely to be more sensitive than Engineering majors to language and how it is used – accuracy, appropriateness, articulation, fluency, and so forth – and likely to set a higher standard for bilingual proficiency.

4.4 Languages the subjects had had in mind

Table 4 shows the responses to the unexpected question, regarding what languages the subjects had had in mind while answering the preceding questions. Among the wide variety of language combinations given, the combination of “Japanese and English” was most frequently cited (73.6%, n = 106). If the combinations of “Japanese, English and other language” are also included, then the ratio increases to 79.2% (n = 114).

On the other hand, only 1.4% (n = 2) of all the subjects mentioned “Korean and Japanese,” and only 2.8% (n = 4) included Chinese as one of the languages, even though ethnic Koreans and Chinese are two of the largest potentially bilingual groups in Japan. The subjects did not associate the term bilingual with the languages that these groups may
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5. Discussion

Three main points become clear from the above results:

1) Bilinguals are given relatively positive images;
2) The selected definitions of bilingual are relatively narrow ones and bilinguals are expected to have a rather good command of at least the speaking and listening skills in both languages, preferably all four skills;
3) To most subjects, bilingual means a speaker of English and Japanese, but not a speaker of other languages.

What the results imply is that bilinguals are perceived to be those who speak Japanese as a native language and have managed to achieve a high level of proficiency in English, which is considered to be an important language for success in education and also in professions in Japan. Most subjects do not think that they have reached levels high enough to claim themselves as bilinguals and feel envious of those who have. Positive images toward bilinguals may have been derived from these envious feelings.

Bilinguals may be sorted out into different sub-categories, based on their particular languages, and identified with distinct connotations. Bilingual, as perceived by the subjects of this experiment, obviously refers to elite bilinguals. When positive images are associated with the concept of bilingual, only elite bilinguals come to mind. Bilinguals who are not considered elite may be evaluated quite differently, as folk bilinguals are often considered in many other societies.

The implications of this phenomenon are rather grave from the educational point of view. The Japanese Ministry of Education has been seriously considering introducing English education at the elementary level instead of waiting until at junior high school. Obviously this is to promote elite bilingualism for children whose mother tongue is Japanese. Some children may benefit from the scheme.

What about children whose mother tongues are other than Japanese or English, though? Their bilingualism is no less valuable than the elite bilingualism of Japanese children (Yamamoto, 1994, 1996). Programs designed to promote their bilingualism should be offered to those children as well. The primary goal of such programs, of course, should be to develop their mother tongues and Japanese. It does not seem, however, that promotion of their bilingualism is included in the scheme.

It has been reported by the Ministry of Education that, as of September 1997, in public schools throughout Japan (elementary school through high school) there were 17,296 students whose mother tongues are not Japanese and who are considered to require JSL (= Japanese as a second language) instruction (The Ministry of Education, 1998). English is a mother tongue of only 2.6% of them. This means that the remaining 97.4%, even if they manage to acquire bilingual proficiency in their mother tongues and Japanese, will not be the kind of bilinguals that the subjects of the present survey had in mind. How will they be perceived? What kind of image will their bilingualism have?

There are limitations in the research. Notably, the sample is numerically small and limited to a particular social group and age. It would be unwise, therefore, to generalize too much about "Japanese attitudes." Nevertheless, the present survey reveals some specific attitudinal traits toward bilingualism. It would be useful to pursue this issue further, by means of more widely distributed surveys.

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