

Among the Others: Language and identity of Ukrainian children raised in Japan

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1. Introduction. Due to a dramatic growth in international migration to Japan since the 1990s, the complexity of experiences and psychological challenges of immigrant children of diverse minority groups has become an increasingly important issue. As the Ukrainian community in Japan is relatively small (1,903 Ukrainian citizens were registered as residents in Japan in 2020 (Ministry of Justice)), the linguistic and cultural aspects of the identity of children with Ukrainian roots have not yet been investigated. This presentation aims to examine the relationship between language and the ethnic/cultural identity of Ukrainian children raised in Japan. It focuses on 1) the language use of Ukrainian children in the family, education, and friendship domains; 2) the interplay of language and problems Ukrainian youth face in order to maintain their home culture and follow the host culture; 3) how these problems shape their sense of self and form their identity.

2. Theoretical background. The research draws upon poststructuralist identity theory in which identity is considered as multiple, fluid, dynamic, and context-dependent individual's sense of self and group membership that can be negotiated and reconstructed (Norton, 2000, 2013; Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004; Bucholtz & Hall, 2005; Block, 2006; Iwasaki 2018; Seals, 2019 et al.). The poststructuralist perspective emphasizes the fundamental role of language in identity formation as “language is the place where our sense of self and our identity or ‘subjectivity’ is constructed and performed” (Baxter, 2016: 36). Identity is formed through multiple subject positions within different discourses whereby identities are located (Baxter, 2016: 38). Therefore, language is a main tool of self-definition. In addition, the pluralism of personal identity is not only manifested in certain discourses but also reflected in narratives as stories of individual experience in which individuals construct their social reality (Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004; De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2012 et al.). In the form of a narrative, a person characterizes oneself, describes one's behavior and the behavior of others, and attaches importance to certain events and factors that shape one's personality.

The study of the phenomenon of identity from the standpoint of poststructuralism is also closely related to the concept of symbolic power as an ability that shapes and changes the organization of the social world, gaining legitimacy by accepting dominant values and principles (Bourdieu, 1991; Heller, 1999). In the context of language, the exercise of power implies an uneven distribution of language functions and their forms of existence in society, as well as different social opportunities that these languages can provide to their speakers. As a result, speakers of different languages or forms of existence can reconcile, transform or, conversely, reject already established identities in order to access symbolic capital.

3. Method. The presentation is based on the results of semi-structured interviews with four Ukrainians (2 females, 2 males) aged 15–26 who have lived in Japan since their early childhood.

4. Results. The socio-demographic characteristics of the research participants are described in Table 1.

Table 1. The socio-demographic characteristics of participants

Name	Gender	Age	Region of birth in Ukraine	Region of residence in Japan	Age of immigration	Occupation	Family ethnicity	Family language in Ukraine	Family language in Japan
Taras	male	19	Central Ukraine	Chubu	11	Japanese company	Ukraine (m) Japan (sf)	Ukrainian	Japanese Ukrainian
Petro	male	26	Central Ukraine	Chubu → Kanto	11	Japanese company	Ukraine (m) Ukraine (f)	Ukrainian Russian	Ukrainian
Anna	female	17	Central Ukraine	Chubu	1	High school student	Ukraine (m) Ukraine (f)	Ukrainian Russian	Ukrainian

Iryna	female	15	Southern Ukraine	Kanto	6	High school student	Ukraine (m) Japan (sf)	Russian	Japanese Ukrainian English
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4.1. Taras's story. Taras emigrated to Japan at the age of 11. There are practically no Ukrainians in the region where he lives, so there are only Japanese people among the young man's friends and those around him at work. Taras's family is Ukrainian-Japanese and therefore bilingual: the man usually speaks Japanese with his stepfather and younger sister born in Japan, while he communicates in Ukrainian with his mother and occasionally with his sister. Although Taras speaks Ukrainian with his mother, he notes that it is not standard Ukrainian language, but rather a dialect (surzhyk) typical of Central Ukraine, where he was born and raised before emigrating.

The Japanese school experience played a key role in shaping the linguistic and cultural identity of the respondents. Taras began to study at school in Japan without prior knowledge of Japanese. He, the only Westerner in the class, was assigned a teacher who helped him learn Japanese. Taras noted that during the first year at school, he did not understand anything. Being at school became more comfortable at about the age of 14 (that is, only after three years in Japan) when he was able to communicate fluently in Japanese with his peers. At the same time, the Japanese language penetrated his life to such an extent that his level of Ukrainian competence declined, and today it is much easier for him to communicate in Japanese.

Although Taras felt a special attitude towards himself as the only white foreigner, he never noticed a negative attitude towards his Ukrainian origin. As Taras states, "the Japanese know almost nothing about Ukraine." Today, Taras identifies himself as Ukrainian, but when asked "Which culture, Ukrainian or Japanese, is closer to you today?", he said he was not interested in either Ukrainian or Japanese culture.

4.2. Petro's story. Petro also emigrated with his parents and sister to Japan when he was 11. During his teenage years, he grew up in a region where there was no Ukrainian community, so the boy's main environment as a child was mostly Japanese. Owing to the Ukrainian-Ukrainian family environment in which he lived, as well as attempts to study remotely according to the Ukrainian school curriculum for two years after moving to Japan, he managed to maintain a high language proficiency in Ukrainian, which he believes is about the same as his Japanese today. It is worth noting that Petro's family was bilingual before moving to Japan: they spoke both Ukrainian and Russian. However, after 6-7 years in Japan, the family gradually switched to Ukrainian. As time elapsed, Petro's parents realized that the dominant use of the Russian language at home can cause a false self-identification of children as representatives of Russian, not Ukrainian culture. The understanding that language is one of the main markers of ethnic and national identity, and that language serves as a means of preserving ethnic identity in living conditions in a foreign cultural environment influenced the further language education of children only in Ukrainian. Today, Petro is above average in Russian but does not use it.

The school environment significantly influenced Petro's cultural and social identity. He, similar to Taras, did not know Japanese at all before emigrating. However, unlike in Taras's case, there were no programs in the elementary school where Petro studied that would effectively prepare foreign children for Japanese-language school life. While attending lessons as a passive listener, the boy felt alienated during the first year of school, so his parents had to hire a tutor who had extra classes with him at home. The workload at the Japanese school and the realization of his outsider position at school among the Japanese majority forced Petro to drop out of Ukrainian school:

I realized that I can't do this and that at the same time. You have to choose one thing. And then I chose the Japanese way for myself.

The main guarantee on this path was the knowledge of the Japanese language and strict adherence to the rules of Japanese society. A clear example of this is the answer to the question "What advice would you give to migrant children who have just moved to Japan?":

Try to learn the language as soon as possible, apparently. Well, and watch the Japanese traditions. Because in Japan, there is such a very important element that you need to feel the atmosphere and understand when something can be said and when it is better not to say it. And especially at school, there are quite critical moments, if you... if you say what is not proper, when it is not proper, it may negatively affect your life for several months.

If you want to live in this society and feel that you are treated well and that you do not have any conflicts with other people, you need to apply these rules to this society. And this is especially true somewhere in high school because teachers keep saying that we should live by the rules, we should do the same for everyone...

Despite the fact that as a teenager Petro tried to assimilate into Japanese society as soon as possible, at the beginning of his studies at university, he changed his beliefs in favor of preserving a Ukrainian identity and accepting himself as an ethnic “Other”:

I realized that I would just be uncomfortable to completely merge with Japanese culture, language and so I thought that I... I would feel more like a free person or myself when I keep this Ukrainian identity.

As a result, today Petro, considering himself a Ukrainian by birth, still feels a sense of belonging to both Ukrainian and Japanese cultures, demonstrating hybrid biculturalism.

4.3. Anna’s story. Petro’s sister, Anna, has lived in Japan since the age of one and a half. Through communication with family members, she was able to master the basics of spoken Ukrainian language. Anna makes it clear that, despite being brought up in a Ukrainian family, life in Japanese society, in particular the Japanese school, has led to the fact that the Japanese language has become more important for her than Ukrainian.

Despite the fact that the girl speaks Japanese at the same level as an average Japanese youth, daily interaction with the almost monogenic population, and especially studying at a Japanese school where the number of foreign students is small, could not help but make her feel “different”. According to Anna, all foreigners, regardless of racial or ethnic characteristics, are classified by the Japanese as “others”:

The Japanese believe that they have the following thoughts: the Japanese and the foreigners. There is no such thing as being Japanese - Americans - Chinese - Russians. They have something like: we and some foreigners. They are all foreigners.

At the same time, Anna thinks that “otherness” can lead to both sympathy and hostility among the Japanese majority. Anna said that she experienced a negative attitude towards herself in elementary school because she was the only foreigner in the class. The teacher accused her of stealing, believing that the Japanese would not have done so. Meanwhile, that sense of humiliation she felt made her want to be the same as everyone else, that is, a Japanese girl.

Growing up, Anna reconsidered her attitude toward both the Ukrainian language and the desire to assimilate with the majority. Her realization of the importance of the Ukrainian language as a marker of her national identity took place in high school when she successfully mastered Japanese and English:

And then I thought, “Stop, I already know Japanese, English, and I don’t know my native Ukrainian.” And somehow, well, I didn’t like it that much. And, well, I started studying. It was only about two or three years ago.

The manifestation of the Ukrainian identity of the girl is connected not only with the level of her competence in her native language and its real use in the Japanese environment but also with her feeling of kinship with Ukrainians in mentality.

4.4. Iryna’s story. After moving to Japan, when she was 6 years old, Iryna grew up in a mixed Ukrainian-Japanese family, where three languages are used simultaneously: the girl uses Ukrainian in communication with her mother and younger brother born in Japan, she speaks Japanese with her stepfather and sometimes with her brother, while her mother and stepfather are communicating mostly in English. Iryna demonstrates an excellent level of knowledge of Japanese and above average in Ukrainian. After her emigration, Iryna’s family also underwent a language transition from Russian to Ukrainian. It turned out that Iryna’s mother decided to switch to Ukrainian to communicate with her children after she joined the Ukrainian community in Japan and started taking her daughter to a Ukrainian Sunday school. Since then, Iryna no longer uses Russian.

Iryna attends school in Tokyo, where the presence of foreigners in the class is relatively common. According to the girl, her foreign origin has never bothered her in Japan. Moreover, at school, as a representative of the Western world, she generally feels more privileged than Asian foreigners. Despite this, Iryna does not feel a sense of belonging to Japanese culture. In her narratives, she repeatedly mentions that she does not like life in Japan, and therefore she most often finds friends among the children of Ukrainians or “hafu”. The girl points out that within the walls of the Japanese school, foreign students are actively educated about the priorities of Japanese society, and she, as a prominent representative of the minority, has no choice but to submit to the Japanese majority, i.e. partially assimilate.

Japan really does not accept the traditions of foreigners or their way of thinking. Even if it is not accepted by foreigners, there are only Japanese rules that you are forced to follow. <...> Abroad, everyone is free, unique, but in Japan, everyone is limited by rules, everyone tries to make everyone the same. There are no individual features here at all, everyone looks the same.

Among all the participants in the study, only Iryna had the opportunity to attend Sunday school from an early age and participate in events of the Ukrainian community in Tokyo. According to her, it is owing to the Ukrainian school that she speaks Ukrainian well. The environment of Sunday school and being surrounded by Ukrainians who share the cultural values and similar social experiences of “a Ukrainian in Japan” has formed a clear awareness of her Ukrainian identity and cultural “otherness” among the Japanese.

5. Conclusions. All informants name themselves as Ukrainians. Taking into account that a person’s identity (cultural as well) is not only formed by self-conception but exists in relation to other contrasting, salient racial differences of Ukrainian people increase their sense of ethnic and national membership to Ukraine. Although the study findings show that participants usually speak Ukrainian and Japanese on a daily basis, almost all of the participants are more dominant in Japanese than Ukrainian. Ukrainian is used in the family and with a few Ukrainian friends, while Japanese is used in all other situations. The formation of their literacy competence in the Ukrainian language originated primarily from their families, while Japanese was learned in pre-school and school, accordingly. Since the social life of the participants, especially school education is mainly in Japanese, the participants indicate that it is hard to gain the same level of exposure to Ukrainian. As a result, they notice that their Japanese language proficiency is much higher than their proficiency in Ukrainian. Although the heritage language level of respondents is not highly developed in comparison to Japanese, the ability to speak Ukrainian still gives them a strong sense of who they are as ethnic individuals.

The formation of cultural and ethnic identity is significantly affected by intergroup attitudes and comparisons to the ethnic majority. On the one hand, respondents feel fully accustomed to Japanese society and the Japanese cultural environment where they were raised. On the other hand, racial differences and attitudes of the host group (e.g. teachers, classmates) make them feel like ethnic “Others”. Research shows that over time participants’ identities have varied in response to social (e.g., living in the city or the rural part of Japan) and psychological factors (e.g., being the only foreigner in the class, attitudes of teachers). Moreover, there is a strong interrelationship between participants’ identities, language use and educational outcomes. Respondents report they have experienced pressure to assimilate, particularly in schools which did not support their cultural differences and identities.

This study of Ukrainian children broadens the perspective of how immigrant children perceive themselves and negotiate their identity while living in Japanese society. It also helps to find ways to create a favorable environment (especially in schools) that can support heritage language education, cultural traditions and the ethnic identity of immigrant children.

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