

Examining the Role of Foreigner Identity in Intercultural Communication: —Exploring the Phenomenon of “Gaijin Power” in Japanese Society —

Swastika Harsh Jajoo (Tohoku University, Graduate Student)

1. Introduction

In our social world, a person simultaneously occupies multiple identity categories. Due to situated social action, identities may shift and recombine to meet new circumstances (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). In essence, meaning-making through language takes place locally and is a goal-oriented activity. The present research locates itself in the realm of sociolinguistic studies and aims to explore how foreigners perform their identities to facilitate intercultural communication in Japanese society, focusing on a phenomenon called ‘Gaijin Smash’. ‘Gaijin Smash’, which is treated here as an overarching term comprising of coinages like ‘Gaijin Power’ and ‘Gaijin Card’, refers to foreigners using their foreignness as an excuse to transgress Japanese cultural conventions either intentionally or accidentally. ‘Gaijin Smash’ has strong linguistic overtones because it often involves pretending not to understand Japanese language or culture to get out of uncomfortable situations among other things. The study aims to answer the following research questions:

- (i.) To what extent do the functions of ignorance in intercultural communication, as introduced by Kumagai & Sato (2009) hold true in the context of ‘Gaijin Smash’? Are there any additional functions to ‘Gaijin Smash’ ?
- (ii.) Which kind of foreigner can ‘Gaijin Smash’ most easily?

2. Literature Review

A range of ethnographic methods have been used to conduct research in the field of intercultural communication and foreigner identity, from Conversation Analysis to in-depth interviews (e.g., Nishizaka 1995; Fukuda 2010; Simmons 2017). Significant themes that emerge in such research include social construction of identity, ignorance, whiteness, language ownership, and English imperialism. The ‘Gaijin’ identity is performative and playful, allowing foreigners to creatively and contextually position themselves to achieve certain goals. Moody (2014) looks at communication held by American ‘Gaijin’ interns in Japanese companies, the ‘outsiders’ present temporarily and for a particular purpose: to gain language and work experience as a student. The identity of a ‘Gaijin’, he argues, allowed for a degree of play in three primary aspects: 1. the use of names and labels in reference to self and other, 2. honorifics, shifts in speech style, and items associated with ideologies of politeness and 3. the use of the English language in an otherwise Japanese environment. Simmons (2017) brings this aspect of play to the issue of privacy negotiations between English language teachers (ELTs), part of the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Programme, and Japanese co-workers. Identity has interactional utility, drawing on both resources of knowledge and ignorance. Kumagai & Sato (2009) examine the role of ignorance in positioning identity and suggest that ignorance serves four functions in the context of ‘Gaijin Smash’: (1) Looking lost and people help you; (2) using ‘ignorance’ as a defense mechanism; (3) faking ‘ignorance’ and choosing not to participate; and (4) claiming ‘I don’t understand Japanese! Why can’t I do this?’. The participants across all three studies are foreigners who possess advanced Japanese language skills, and the primary method of investigation is in-depth interviews.

3. Methodology

One-on-one, semi-structured interviews were the chosen method of data collection for this study. The researcher interviewed a total of twelve students. While recruiting students, the eligibility criteria for potential participants included the following: having spent a year or more studying in Japan, holding an advanced level Japanese qualification (either N1 or N2 of the Japanese Language Proficiency Test), and being between the age of

20 to 30 years old. One of the aims of this research is to examine which kind of foreigner holds the most power to ‘Gaijin Smash’, and to this end, three categories were created, namely Category 1, Category 2, and Category 3 with four participants each. The distribution of these categories is entirely based on phenotypes and not ethnicity, with Category 1 being the Caucasian phenotype, Category 2 being the East-Asian phenotype and Category 3 being phenotypes other than the Caucasian or East-Asian phenotypes. The questions revolved around participants’ own perception of their foreigner identity, their knowledge of the term ‘Gaijin Smash’, their experiences of using ‘Gaijin Smash’ and the motivations behind it, what they thought about ‘Gaijin Smash’ and race, and linguistic expectations from foreigners. To ensure anonymity, all participants are labelled based on the category they have been grouped into, for instance, the first participant from Category 1 is labelled as ‘C1P1’.

4. Analysis

The premise of this analysis is built on four semiotic tools discussed by Bucholtz & Hall (2005): practice, indexicality, ideology, and performance. Bourdieu (1977) posits that language is a practice rather than an abstract system of rules and practice is habitual social activity or the series of actions that constitute our daily lives. What practices individuals engage in is dependent on the identity categories they inhabit and invoke and are the outcome of social agency. Indexicality is the semiotic operation of juxtaposition, whereby one entity points to another via repeated and non-accidental cooccurrence: smoke is an index of fire, clouds of rain (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). We will see how some participants use stereotypically ‘bad’ Japanese to index the image of the ‘ignorant foreigner’, the protagonist of ‘Gaijin Smash’. Ideology is what establishes the issue of power as a social phenomenon, becoming central to how language accrues sociopolitical meaning. Ideology is viewed as organizing and enabling all cultural beliefs and practices as well as the power relations that result from these (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). Historically, the ‘Gaijin’ identity is often constructed in contrast with the ‘Nihonjin’ identity. This contrast was sometimes so deeply emphasized that the foreigner identity was seen as being ‘lacking’ in and incapable of understanding inherently ‘refined’ Japanese manners and customs. While ‘Nihonjinron’ does not hold the popularity it did early today and many of its views have been questioned by scholars around the globe, it could be conjectured that the remnants of the beliefs it encouraged assist partially in ‘Gaijin Smash’, bringing ideologies of the cultural ‘other’ into play. Performativity is deliberate social display and is what constructs our social world, investing people with the power to render certain aspects of their identity relevant at certain times. ‘Gaijin Smash’ is a performance of the foreigner identity and while it can be used to ‘get away’ with things, it is also used to subvert ideologies and question cultural expectations. The analysis is divided into three sections: the functions of ‘Gaijin Smash’, reasons behind ‘Gaijin Smash’ and who can ‘Gaijin Smash’.

The first aim of this study is to examine the extent to which functions of ‘ignorance’, as listed in Kumagai & Sato (2009), hold true in the context of ‘Gaijin Smash’. Analyzing the data procured revealed that while functions (1) and (3) can be observed frequently, (2) and (4) are uncommon occurrences. The functions relevant to us here, namely (1) and (3), will be relabeled as (i) and (ii). Besides these, there are two more functions that emerged from the thematic analysis conducted: (iii) Increased freedom of expression and (iv) Not subscribing to cultural expectations. Additionally, an instantiation of function (ii) has also been included in this analysis: (ii.a) Overcoming minor trouble with the police.

Functions of ‘Gaijin Smash’ (Table 1)

Themes	Semiotic Tools	Examples
<i>(i) Looking lost and people help you</i>	Practice	And I frankly think when I got in trouble, I tend to not be able to speak Japanese. I was working in one city office in Japan. I mean, last year, and at the time, I think that I got, yeah, I got a lot of help because I'm gaijin. I went to the city office to make my documents and at that time, I got a lot of help. Oh yeah, I behaved like I don't know anything. I know that I should have researched more about it, but (...) I just pretended. (C2P7, interview, 2021)

<i>(ii) Faking Ignorance to Choose not to Participate</i>	Indexicality, Ideology of English Imperialism	Guilty as charged, I have pretended, but listen, I've used this both in Japan and in Spain, and in the UK when I get accosted on the streets, by a seller or something or somebody that's doing some form of inquiry, and I don't want to be bothered because I'm feeling socially awkward. And I don't want to go through the awkwardness of saying "No, thanks, I'm really not interested." When I don't want to say that I pretend that I don't speak the language of the country that I'm in so when it's in Spain, I shoot back in English. When I'm in England, I shoot back in Spanish. And in Japan, I add W's and start speaking <i>arigato gozaimashita</i> just <i>nihongo wa hanasemasen</i> this kind of exaggerated, I mean, me no speaking Japanese, you know. (C1P3, interview, 2021)
<i>(ii.a) Overcoming minor trouble with the police</i>		So, I got slightly in trouble with the police a couple of times in Japan. And both of those times, I pretended that my Japanese was a lot worse than it was. So, the first time, you know, when the lights are red, you can't cross the road, even as a pedestrian because it's against the law (...) But I cross the road, red light. There are no cars, there was one car, okay? And it wasn't indicated to turn my way. So, I said, oh, it's going straight. And I was on my bike, my bicycle. And as it passed, I realized, it was a police car. And so, they did a U turn, and they were following me. And I heard them shouting out of the windows, stop. And so, they were talking, and they asked for my alien card and (...) they took the number down and then I started freaking out oh my god, like I pretended that my Japanese was a lot worse than it was by being like, I'm like, <i>Igirisu ao wataru okay</i> you know, really stupid Japanese. And because I knew that if it's too much effort, they're not going to be able to find a translator, they just gonna be like, oh, forget it, you know? Yeah. And so, they took my <i>zairyu caado</i> number and then just left. (C1P1, interview, 2021)
<i>(iii) Increased freedom of expression</i>	Performance	Well, first speaking my opinion more, really, I think that is the biggest function. I have an episode when I was working at the Chamber of Commerce, that my colleague, well, she was actually my senpai. She didn't like certain thing about the company, about our organization. But she couldn't really speak up. Maybe was against the culture. So she was kind of, you know, telling me that back then, can you say this? Maybe if you say this, it'll be okay. And I asked her why. You know, I'm, I'm the youngest officer here. What power do I have? Yeah. And she was like, if you say this kind of thing, everyone will just understand. (C2P5, interview, 2021)
<i>(iv) Not Subscribing to Cultural Expectations</i>	Ideology of Whiteness	(In the context of overwork) And they were like, No, no, no, nobody's judging you for not doing it. Because you're a foreigner, you're your white, right? (C1P3, interview, 2021)

The reasons behind 'Gaijin Smash' can be categorized as (i.) Expectation from a foreigner, (ii.) Assertion of individual identity, (iii.) Difficulty in saying 'No' and (iv.) Others. (i.) Expectation from a foreigner is the most dominant factor, with several participants sharing how 'Gaijin Smash' can occur seamlessly because not much is expected of the typical foreigner in Japan in terms of understanding cultural norms or the Japanese language. This has strong roots in 'Nihonjinron', texts dealing with social and cultural Japanese identity, a feature of which is emphasizing the uniformity and uniqueness of Japanese society and language to an extent which assumes it to be inaccessible for foreigners.

'Gaijin Smash' and the question of race was also a vital consideration of this study. Dale (1986), in his discussion on 'Nihonjinron', points out that foreigners who differ phenotypically from the Japanese are seen as

constituting the representative image of foreigners in Japan, and foreigners that are phenotypically like the Japanese seldom fall into this image. Most participants echoed this view. Besides historical politics of race in Japan, a more recent factor influencing this view is the ideology of English imperialism, which associates English with ‘the civilized’ White races or Westerners (Kumagai & Sato, 2009). In a similar vein, Tsuda (1993) writes how often, Japanese people tend to feel not only inferior to white people but also pressured to speak English in their presence. This tendency could also explain why white people are considered more ‘foreign’ than their Asian counterparts. The first two functions can be thought of as more immediately governed by racial appearances, while the final two functions are more context dependent. Overall, it is easier for Category 1 or the typical ‘Gaijin’ to ‘Gaijin Smash’.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This study contends that it is not possible to look at the phenomenon of ‘Gaijin Smash’ in black and white terms. It cannot be denied that the term has negative connotations to it, but ‘smashing’ can also mean redefining cultural boundaries in a way that benefit both the interlocutor and other parties involved. ‘Gaijin Smash’ has been heavily synonymous with rule breaking and foreigners using their ‘foreign’ status as an excuse to get away with things. It is out of question that this behavior is inexcusable in contexts where there is legal punishment involved or moral harm is being done to someone, but all ‘rules’ do not necessarily have implications of legality. Any society can be considered to have its own set of implicit rules or norms that people act in accordance with, but these are not always beneficial; they could be associated with old conventions and restrict the freedom of people but continue to be respected and followed nonetheless because of practice. While it can be extremely difficult to question such ‘rules’ when one is born and raised in a society that subscribes to them because of how the processes of socialization work (Ochs, 1993), it becomes easier to reevaluate and even reconfigure them as an outsider. This is exactly what the foreigner identity may afford or make possible: a forgivable resistance to such rules. ‘Gaijin Smash’ can not only help foreigners assert their own individual identity, but also holds the power to help people around them do the same. Further, within its exploration of ‘Gaijin Smash’ and racial appearance, this study briefly shows how Western supremacy and hegemony of English continue to prevail in Japan.

6. References

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