

Late Bilingual Japanese Women: An Interplay Between Linguistic Competence, Identity, and Empowerment

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This paper reports on a study that examined how four bilingual Japanese women see their bilingual selves in a wider socio-cultural context. Their interviews revealed that their cross-cultural experience has impacted their identity and that their linguistic competence in English has been instrumental in empowering them. Their responses also provided insights into how they see themselves and the world around them once they have achieved English proficiency. The current study was driven by my own curiosity as a late bilingual Japanese woman. My subjective role as a researcher, my perspectives on bilingualism, and my experience as a late bilingual Japanese woman are thus all integral parts of the inquiry.

本研究では、4人の日本人女性がより広い社会文化的文脈の中でバイリンガルである自分自身をどのように見ているかを調査した。インタビューから異文化体験がアイデンティティに影響を与えていること、英語力がエンパワーメントにつながっていることが分かった。また、英語力を身につけた後の自分や周りの世界をどう見ているかについても知る事ができた。本研究はバイリンガルである私自身の好奇心に突き動かされたものであり、研究者としての主観的な役割、バイリンガリズムに対する自らの視点、後期バイリンガル日本人女性としての経験が本研究にとって不可欠な部分となっている。

The relationship between language and identity has attracted much attention since the turn of the century and the sphere of research on bilinguals and bilingualism continues to pose intriguing, yet formidable questions. Are the two languages represented in a rigidly separate manner? To what extent does the regular use of two languages over an extended period leave its mark on the speaker's identity? Kanno's study (2000), for instance, shed light on the linguistic and cultural identities of young adult *kikokushijo* (returnees, the children of Japanese expatriates) through discourse analysis. The data, a collection of the stories of four Japanese returnees who spent their adolescent years in North America, illustrated their inner conflicts, feelings of being misfits, and a sense of insecurity about their identity.

The current inquiry examines what it means to be a late bilingual Japanese woman in a rapidly changing linguistic landscape, through in-depth analysis of the interview responses of the participants. All of them were born in Japan and developed their linguistic competence to become Japanese-English bilinguals after reaching their teenage years. Unlike many Japanese who learn English almost exclusively in classroom settings, these women have lived overseas, including in countries where English is widely spoken, in their

adolescent or adult years. Pavlenko (2000) describes a group of individuals who acquired their second language (L2) after early childhood as “late or adult bilinguals” (p. 178) and the participants in the current study match this classification.

Bilingual/Bilingualism

As the world has become intricately interconnected, bilingualism has been accepted as a norm or has been on the rise in many parts of the world. In discussing bilingualism, Grosjean (2010) focuses on the actual use of multiple languages. He defines bilinguals as individuals who have two or more languages in their linguistic repertoire and use them in everyday life. This study adopts Grosjean’s (1985) holistic stance toward bilinguals, that is, individuals who may not have attained “native-like competence” in one of their speaking languages but may still be regarded as being bilinguals. Regarding the age factor in bilingualism, the terms *early* and *late bilinguals* are used. Pelham and Abrams (2014) base their categorisation on the age at which people became fluent in their L2, that is, late bilinguals are those who became bilingual after early childhood. Their definition is the one I adopt in this article, which aligns with that of Pavlenko (2000).

Language skills have always been a requirement in some fields, such as trade or diplomacy. Nowadays more and more firms have a global reach. Therefore, having a solid grasp of multiple languages can naturally widen your opportunities for career advancement. Speaking two languages rather than just one also has practical benefits; more books you can enjoy reading and richer international travel experiences you can have. Moreover, being bilingual may enable a person to view the world from different perspectives.

Bilingualism in Japan

The majority of Japanese bilinguals are monocultural bilinguals, that is, they have become bilingual in a largely monocultural environment and remain members of a single culture. That means only a small portion of Japanese are exposed to English from early childhood. *Kikokushijo* or Japanese returnees are, therefore, seen in Japan as privileged language learners even though they often experience identity conflicts (Kanno, 2000).

Commonly held perceptions of bilingualism among Japanese nationals can be somewhat paradoxical. The ability to use English seems to be valued in Japan; however, bilingualism is acknowledged with tepid enthusiasm in Japanese society (Hashimoto, 2007). What has had negative effects on Japanese people’s attitudes toward learning English? The Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) has stipulated that English should be used as the medium of instruction in English education (MEXT, 2009). Although MEXT has spent significant time and monetary resources on them, its English education policies have been criticised by the public and the business community for not addressing weaknesses in communicating in English among Japanese students. Keidanren (Japan Business Federation) has raised serious concerns over Japan’s international competitiveness, saying that Japanese students were not making sufficient progress in their communicative skills in English and has urged MEXT to take the initiative more (2017, p.6). The toughest impediment of all, however, appears to be the university entrance examination system. English teachers in Japan generally regard grammar-focused teaching as essential to preparing for university entrance examinations. As Kikuchi and Browne (2009) note, there is “a complicated gap between educational policies and actual teaching practice in Japan” (p.172).

One common assumption in Japan is that the L2 a bilingual speaks is, in effect, English. There is a tendency to value bilingualism more as the command of English increases and communication skills take a front-seat role (Yamamoto, 2000). Therefore, a

narrow definition that remains prevalent in Japan is of a bilingual who speaks English with native-like fluency in addition to Japanese.

Literature Review

Poststructuralist scholars working in the field of second language acquisition (SLA) have pushed forward with sociolinguistics-oriented approaches in the past three decades. Norton and Morgan (2013) state that “poststructuralism constitutes a set of theoretical stances that serve to critique prevailing assumptions regarding the sources and nature of identity” (p.1). Peirce (1995) posits a dialectical relationship between language and identity, arguing language is both “constitutive of and constituted by a language learner’s social identity” (p.13). And Norton (2000) argues that identity is closely connected to “how a person understands his or her relationship to the world,” “how that relationship is constructed across time and space,” and “how the person understands possibilities for the future” (p.5) This article adopts a conceptual framework comprising two main strands: the notions of 1) globalisation and 2) neoliberal subjectivities, both of which are theoretically underpinned by poststructuralist perspectives.

Globalisation

The waves of globalisation have led to a re-evaluation of bilingualism. In Applied Linguistics, there has been a partial shift of focus from the structure and system of language to the more critical theorisation of language in socio-economic contexts.

Technologies of the 21st century have brought about easy access to the latest information in English through the Internet. This feeling of closeness to communities where English is widely spoken may serve as motivation to learn English. Thus, the identity construction of language learners can be tied to their identification with others or affiliation with communities beyond their geographical boundaries. For some non-native learners of English, English-speaking communities (i.e., Anglophone nations) are the desired communities that may offer them a new sense of identity in the future. Kanno and Norton (2003) describe the concept of *imagined communities* as “groups of people, not immediately tangible and accessible with whom we connect through the power of the imagination” (p. 241). According to Kanno and Norton, these communities have an impact on our learning trajectories although we are not yet members of such societies. The notion of imagined communities, therefore, symbolises learners’ willingness to step into unknown terrains and undertake this process of self-reinvention (Kramsch, 2009, p.10).

Central to my understanding of the material benefits of linguistic competence is Bourdieu’s concept of *capital* (1986, 1991). Bourdieu (1986) introduced the notion of *cultural capital*, which symbolises the advantages that people acquire as part of their life experiences, their peer group contacts, and their family backgrounds (e.g., certain kinds of knowledge and linguistic abilities). Perceiving language as a locus closely associated with individual identities, Bourdieu (1991) put forward the notion of *linguistic capital* as one aspect of cultural capital. In short, linguistic capital encompasses both linguistic competence for accuracy and the ability to use language as a powerful instrument in a particular linguistic market.

Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism is the hegemonic economic doctrine that underlies current market logic (Shankar & Cavanaugh, 2012) and it frames English as a resource with enhanced exchange value (Heller, 2010). In this paper, neoliberalism is used as a reference for discussing two different aspects of the correlation between linguistic competence and

identity; one is linked with the material value of linguistic competence in English and the other is linked with self-empowerment associated with the concept of neoliberal subjectivities.

Of importance in considering the link between neoliberalism and linguistic competence are such notions as *commodification* and *eliteness* (Heller, 2010). In a capitalist economic system, *commodification* is defined as the transformation of things into commodities or tradable objects. The term has made inroads into the domain of sociolinguistics, signalling the existence of markets where English has become a valued commodity (Block, 2010; Duchêne & Heller, 2012; Heller, 2010). The idea that English is a desirable linguistic resource and is crucial to have access to global markets has led to competition over its distribution; speakers of standard English are much sought after in the language teaching industry in Asia, for instance.

Heller adopts the term *elite bilingualism* in her study on bilingualism in Canada (2002, p. 49) to capture the permeation of standard, monolingual forms of English as desirable language models for French speakers, which in turn, suggests a higher level of social achievement associated with it. In this study, she reported that, for Québécois in particular, standardised varieties of English are so valued in the job market that managers in private companies often request to be transferred to English-speaking regions where they can hone their English skills. Thus, linguistic investments are often motivated by elite status in society or economic gains such as better employment opportunities (Heller, 2007; Duchêne and Heller, 2012). The term *language commodification* symbolises a shift in the way language is viewed; language can be interpreted in relation to its marketability, which informs the material values in our lives (Block, 2010; Heller, 2007).

As Harvey (2007) argues, neoliberalism is not simply an economic and political framework, but it also reflects everyday language use in a globalised world. Brown (2003) calls neoliberalism a “constructivist project” (p. 40) and explains this stance as follows:

neoliberalism normatively constructs and interpellates individuals as entrepreneurial actors in every sphere of life. It figures individuals as rational, calculating creatures whose moral autonomy is measured by their capacity for “self-care” —the ability to provide for their own needs and service their own ambitions. (p.42)

According to Brown, a neoliberal environment contributes to the formation of subjectivities for those who want to be free and successful in life. Brown notes that the Foucauldian notion of *technologies of the self* serves as the theoretical foundation of neoliberal subjectivities (cited in Lemke, 2001, p. 201). Brown (2003), elaborating on this Foucauldian scheme, argues that all dimensions of our daily life should be configured in terms of market rationality, which in turn, formulates neoliberal subjectivities.

The voluntary competition with oneself triggered by self-interest is aggressively sought out, which in turn leads to self-empowerment. Competence in English may further lead to the empowerment of speakers, as it enables them to communicate with people of various linguistic backgrounds.

Studies on Female Japanese Bilinguals

Despite the Japanese government’s attempts to boost women’s participation in the job market by introducing legislation and by reducing discriminatory practices, gender inequality persists in Japan. Traditional gender roles are imposed on women in a highly male-dominant society (Belarmino & Roberts, 2019). A lack of gender equality in terms of pay scales and promotion opportunities in the Japanese workplace has been a long-standing issue (Yamaguchi, 2019). Women are provided with limited choices and opportunities at

work because many Japanese companies are hierarchical and patriarchal, both in structure and management (Kitamura, 2008; Yamaguchi, 2019). The gender wage gap in Japan stood at 24.5% in 2018, the second largest among Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) nations (cited in Yamaguchi, 2019).

As part of structural reforms aimed at revitalising the stagnant economy, the Equal Employment Opportunity Law (EEOL) was enacted in 1986 to address the issues of gender inequality in the workplace. Abe (2010) examined the progress of the gender wage gap for the period 1975-2005, employing the Basic Survey of Wage Structure, a survey conducted every year by the Ministry of Health and Welfare. She used “pre-EEOL cohorts” (those who finished schooling before the enactment of the EEOL) and “post-EEOL cohorts” (those who finished schooling after 1986) for comparison. The data showed that the gender wage ratio, measured as the ratio of the female hourly wage to the male hourly wage, was 0.60 in 1980, while it was 0.70 in 2004. Abe reports that the EEOL contributed to narrowing the pay gap to a certain extent and attributes the narrowing mainly to changes in the education level of full-time female workers. Even though Japanese women are now more economically independent than before, deep-seated societal pressures on them to be *ryosai kenbo* (good wives, wise mothers) are likely to act as an impediment and keep traditional gender bias in Japan (Belarmino & Roberts, 2019).

Inoue (2007) observed workplace gender equality programmes in a Tokyo corporate office in the early 1990s, after the enactment of the EEOL, and reported on the interplay of language, gender, and neoliberalism. According to Inoue, women are capable of acting on their freedom and, at the same time, are willing to take responsibility for their conducts, or *jiko sekinin*, (p.83) through a unique self-governance mechanism. Inoue thus implies that Japanese women should find ways of empowering themselves so that they can become proactive decision-makers, instead of waiting for top-down solutions provided by the central government for improving their positions and opportunities in the workplace.

Some Japanese women explore the possibility of constructing new identities through learning English abroad. Pavlenko and Norton (2007) argue that women around the world see acquiring a global language “as a way of liberating themselves from the confines of gender patriarchy” (p.597). Takahashi (2013) reports that female Japanese sojourners in Australia embrace a desire to establish alternative identities, moving away from a male-dominated society or mundane and predictable patterns of life in their motherland.

When Japanese women study English, it can broaden their sense of who they are. McMahill (2001) undertook a case study of grassroots English classes in Japan. The classes, named “Colors of English,” were attended by both female Japanese-born learners and their female foreign-born English instructors. According to McMahill, the classes were structured in such a way that a gender-related theme was picked and discussed in English, with all the members bringing in their perspectives and expressing their views on the given topic (p.307). McMahill revealed that all L2 learners in the classes said that English allowed them to express different facets of their identity. It was also noted that some said that they expressed themselves more explicitly in English than in Japanese (p.333).

Some Japanese women are motivated to perfect their English in immersive settings and become bilinguals for the empowerment it brings. According to Takahashi (2013), those women who choose to move to Australia often seek romantic liaisons with native speakers of English to ultimately obtain a competitive edge as proficient users of a global language. In the English classes McMahill (2001) reported on, speakers of standard English were purposefully recruited as instructors while Japanese attendees were those who have invested substantial time and money to acquire linguistic competence in English. Therefore, the learning environment of these particular English classes can be said to be a

manifestation of “eliteness.” McMahon argues that these female learners were motivated to learn English as a means of obtaining “a weapon for self-empowerment as women in Japan and as women of color in the world” (p.332).

The research reported in this article aims to explore the impact of cross-cultural experience on the participants’ identities, the benefits they perceive of being bilingual, and how their linguistic competence in English can lead to self-empowerment. To these ends, it attempts to respond to the following research questions (RQs):

RQ1: How do the participants view cross-cultural experience and its impact on their identity as bilinguals?

RQ2: How do the participants perceive “native-like competence in English,” “eliteness,” and the material/non-material benefits of being bilingual?

RQ3: How do the participants relate linguistic competence in English to a sense of self-empowerment?

Methodology

Author Positionality

Data in this study were co-constructed through close collaboration between the four participants and myself. I have a similar linguistic background to the participants. I have been using Japanese and English in different educational and socio-economic contexts in Japan and internationally, which has contributed to my journey to become a bilingual and an independent thinker. I acknowledge that my subjective role, my own lived experiences, and my standpoint as a Japanese late bilingual woman have significant implications for the inquiry.

Participants

To perform an in-depth analysis and interpretation of the research area, only those who met a pre-determined set of criteria were asked to participate in this study. All of the participants are female Japanese-English bilinguals who 1) were born in Japan and acquired English proficiency after early childhood and 2) have sojourned or lived abroad, including in countries where English is widely spoken, for longer than a month at a time in their adolescent or adult years. To protect their identities, pseudonyms were assigned to each participant. Hanae and Yumiko are my acquaintances and Kaori and Haruka were recruited through an advertisement posted on the Japanese Society Facebook page of a U.K. university.

Hanae, 53

Hanae is a *kikokushijo* who returned to Japan after living abroad when she was a child. Due to her father’s relocation, she moved to Pittsburgh, PA (USA) at the age of five. Upon returning to Japan at the age of seven, she continued her elementary and secondary school education in Japan. While she was attending university in Japan, she visited Nashville, TN (USA), where she took a course at a language school during her seven-week stay. She honed her English and successfully attained a high level of proficiency without moving out of Japan again. She is currently working for a foreign-affiliated company where English is the official language of business.

Yumiko, 49

Yumiko started studying English in junior high school, but it was not until she went to Canada with her husband at the age of 29 that she began using all four English skills. Following her two-year stay in Canada, she moved to the Netherlands, accompanying her

husband. After living in the Netherlands for seven months, she began studying at a university in Hawaii. Upon completion of her Master's programme, she moved to the UK, where she was reunited with her husband. She is currently in Japan, providing linguistic support to visiting foreign interns at a government-designated hospital.

Kaori, 26

Kaori started classical ballet at the age of five and left Japan when she was 15, having been selected to join a ballet school in London. Her decision to go abroad was driven by her desire to pursue a professional career in ballet. She tried hard to adapt to British culture while going through rigorous demands. After graduating from ballet school, she was hired by a ballet company in Eastern Europe at the age of 19. She was back in the UK at the age of 22 and is currently enrolled in an undergraduate course at a U.K. university.

Haruka, 25

Haruka started learning English when she was nine, at a small *juku* (cram school) in her neighbourhood. While she was an undergraduate at a Japanese university, she went to Muenster, Germany, her first sojourn abroad, and attended a university there for six months. Following a brief homecoming, she enrolled in an intensive IELTS course in the Philippines. During a three-month stay in the Philippines, her English scores dramatically improved. At the time of the interview, she was back in Japan after spending one year in the UK and completing her Master's degree at a U.K. university.

Data Collection

This study incorporated data from questionnaires and interviews as a form of triangulation for comprehensive and rigorous data analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) and employed a constructivist paradigm which aims to “rely as much as possible on the participants’ views of the situation being studied” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p.8). In this research, therefore, the participants’ narratives about their lived experiences, in their own words, serve as rich data sources.

Preliminary Questionnaires

Questionnaires in English (see Appendix) were emailed to the participants to collect data before the interviews. This step was taken to know their socio-biographical backgrounds and language learning history, to facilitate the flow of the sequenced data collection, and most importantly, to create a list of interview questions. Generally speaking, the participants in the study are well-educated individuals who have utilised their linguistic capital for their own purposes. The information gathered through preliminary questionnaires served as solid databases based on which interview questions were formulated.

Online Interviews

The online interviews were conducted in Japanese, according to the choice of the interviewees, via Skype. The interviews were organised sequentially: 1) greetings; 2) introductory questions; 3) interview questions; 4) follow-up questions; and 5) closing remarks. Greetings included words of appreciation for completing the preliminary questionnaires and taking time for the interviews. Introductory questions were intended to confirm the information obtained from the questionnaires and to establish rapport with the participants. Interview questions were determined in such a way as to align with the RQs. While the interview questions were scripted, follow-up questions were administered

when the participants' responses needed clarification.

Each interview lasted 30 to 40 minutes, during which the researcher and a participant co-constructed a space for exploring information relevant to the inquiry. Sharing personal experiences through a one-to-one dialogue led to creating a sense of belonging to imagined communities of late bilingual Japanese women. The close collaboration between the interviewer and respondents resulted in thick, descriptive data. The dialogues were audio-recorded with the consent of the participants. The content of the interviews was transcribed and checked by the participants to confirm their accuracy before the author translated it into English.

Data Analysis

The data were analysed by reading each of the transcripts. The process was undertaken in the following steps:

STEP 1: The researcher read through all the transcripts to get a general idea of what the overall data looked like, and then re-read each transcript and took notes.

STEP 2: The researcher picked out the phrases in the transcripts from different participants that appeared to relate to the RQs.

STEP 3: The researcher grouped together those phrases which appeared to have similar meanings.

STEP 4: The researcher sorted the groups of phrases based on the RQs.

STEP 5: The researcher selected representative quotations which placed the RQ-related phrases in context. Selection was made in the light of the theoretical concepts and arguments from previous studies that were presented in earlier sections of this paper.

Research Findings and Discussion

The total recording time ran to nearly three hours when all interviews were combined. The transcript for each participant was seven to eight pages on average. Hanae was eager to make contributions to this research project and her answers were detailed. Yumiko expressed her thoughts straightforwardly, recollecting episodes at different times and places in her life. Kaori sounded confident in herself and her responses appeared to resonate with her inner voice and mental resilience. Haruka was full of energy and her laid-back attitude helped produce an active dialogue.

The following are key interview questions aligned with the RQs. The interviewees responded at length to the questions that are linked to their identity and experience, without being solicited by the researcher to do so. Consequently, the researcher was able to make meaning out of bigger units (sentences or long phrases) rather than needing to cut the discourse into small pieces (words or short phrases) to capture the essence of the responses. The excerpts include the preceding and following portions of those quotations to clarify the contexts in which they were used.

RQ1: How do the participants view cross-cultural experience and its impact on their identity as bilinguals?

Interview Q: 異なる言語、文化という環境下で、自身のアイデンティティやものの見方に変化はありましたか？ Do you find any changes in your identities and perspectives in different linguistic and cultural settings?

Hanae: 現地 [米国]の小学校に5歳で放り込まれて。気づいたのは日本が小さな国で、米国は社会、文化が多様だということ。大学時代に渡米した時は、国際的な雰囲気溶けこめるようになり、自信もついて、自身の価値観に則

った生き方を想像したりしました。

I was tossed into an elementary school [in the US] at the age of five. I became aware that Japan is a small country and that America is socially and culturally diverse. When I revisited the US while I was attending a university, I became able to blend into an international environment, gained self-confidence, and imagined what it would be like to live by my own values.

Yumiko: 主人と最初に行ったカナダでは会話できるレベルじゃなくて。カナダから英語が共通言語として使われているオランダに移り、社会、文化的な違いも楽しめるようになりましたね。違った世界をみて、目から鱗が落ちたというか。

In Canada, the first foreign country I stayed in with my husband, I could hardly speak English. We then moved to the Netherlands, where people use English as a lingua franca. There, I felt at ease and embraced socio-cultural diversities. Well, the scales fell from my eyes, seeing a different world.

Kaori: 海外では日本人だということをより意識させられましたね。東欧では小さな町に住んでいたのも、私というかアジア人だと、宇宙人を見たような反応で。

I was made more aware of my Japanese identity overseas. Since I lived in a small town in Eastern Europe, local people reacted as if they saw an alien whenever they saw me, or any Asian.

Haruka: 感じたのは、習慣や当たり前とと思っていた事とか、コミュニケーションの仕方とか、無意識ながら日本の文化に強く影響されているということ。その人を本当に理解したければ、固定観念を打ち破り、「一人の人間」として見るのが大事だと思いました。

I realised that certain aspects of my life, such as customs, norms, and the way I communicate are unconsciously yet strongly influenced by Japanese culture. I found it important to overcome stereotypes and see people as unique individuals to truly understand them.

These responses suggest that their cross-cultural experience, mixed with hardships and blessings, has impacted their identity as bilinguals. Kaori said that she was made more aware of her Japanese identity in foreign countries. Hanae mentioned that she imagined what it would be like to live by her own values, an image of American individualism, when she revisited the US in her early 20s. Yumiko and Haruka also talked about some changes in their way of seeing and thinking about things in light of fresh experiences abroad.

Interview Q: 「日本語話者としてのアイデンティティ」と「英語話者としてのアイデンティティ」は違うと感じますか？ Do you feel that your *Japanese-speaking identity* is different from your *English-speaking identity*?

Hanae: 英語を話す時はちょっと別人のように感じます。コミュニケーションスタイルが変わる理由を説明するのは難しいのですが、日本語を話している自分とは違うという意識。

I feel a bit like a different person when I speak English. It's difficult to explain why my communication style changes, but I am aware that I am not the person I am in Japanese when speaking English.

Yumiko: 違うという感覚はあまりない、というか、変わるように見えても状

況の変化に応じて行動しているだけで言語とは関係ないようにも思えて。夫は「OSが違う」って、英語の時はアイデンティティがすごく変わるって言いますけど。

I don't really feel that difference. I mean, what is perceived as an identity shift may be a behavioural shift in a changed situation, independent of language. Well, my husband claims that his identity changes a lot when he uses English, saying he's "switching operating systems."

Kaori: 15歳で海外に出るというのもバレエのプロになりたいという気持ちが後押ししたと思います。英語が殆ど話せなかったけれど、それに対する不安がほんとはなかった。プロのダンサーとして働いた東欧では、不利なこととか差別もよくありました。日本人としてのアイデンティティとか、守りたい部分を変えていかなければならなかった。15歳の時のアイデンティティからは変わりすぎている気がします。今のアイデンティティはたぶん英国のもので、日本に来た時に日本語を話すことで調整というか。

My decision to go abroad at the age of 15 was strongly driven by my desire to pursue a professional career in ballet. I could hardly speak English then, but I was hardly worried about it at all. I worked as a professional dancer in Eastern Europe, where I often experienced unfair treatment and discrimination. I had to change my Japanese identity—something I wanted to retain. My sense of self has shifted too much since I was 15. My identity now is probably British, so when I came to Japan, I adjusted to the Japanese mode of speech.

Haruka: 母国語じゃない時は自分が別の人間のように感じる場合があります。海外ドラマとかの影響でネイティブを無意識に真似しているのかも。英語になるとモードが変わって、それがアイデンティティにも関係しているように思います。

I sometimes feel like a different person when I speak something other than my native language. Maybe I subconsciously imitate native speakers due to the influence of foreign TV dramas. When switching to English, the mode changes, and I think that is linked to a change in my identity.

These responses may well imply that it is not unusual for bilinguals to have multiple, fluid identities, as Kanno (2000) asserts. This also seems to be aligned with the statements made by Japanese female L2 learners in the "Colors of English" lessons (McMahill, 2001). McMahill documented that English allowed the learners to express different facets of their identity. However, Yumiko's response is different from the other three; she explained that she is uncertain if such a perceived shift can be attributed to switching from Japanese to English.

RQ2: How do the participants perceive "native-like competence in English," "eliteness," and material/non-material benefits of being bilingual?

Interview Q: ネイティブスピーカーに自分も近づきたいと思いましたか？ Did you wish to emulate native English speakers?

Interview Q: それが英語を学ぶ最大の理由でしたか？ Was that the main motivation for learning English?

Hanae: 英語の音とか流れとかすごく好きで、小さい頃に聴いたからだ。理路整然と話す人が多い、それにも憧れます。

I love the sound and flow of English—probably because I heard it when I was little. Many

people speak logically, and I admire that too.

Yumiko: 主人が頑張っていたから、それで。でも、英語が自分の中になかった時と入ってきてからは確実に違う。

I learned English for the sake of my husband. But I, now with English inside me, am definitely different from what I used to be when English was not part of me.

Kaori: 一番の理由ではなかった。英語はあくまでバレエのため。ただ上達するにつれてネイティブになった方がいいかなという気持ちが出ましたけど。

It was not the main reason. I needed English solely for ballet. As I progressed, I started to feel that it would be better to be a native speaker, though.

Haruka: ネイティブスピーカーというより、英語がペラペラのフランス人の教授とか、ベトナム出身の講師とかが大学にいたので、そういうふうにはなりたくないあと。

Rather than a native speaker, I would emulate, for instance, a professor, a French national who is extremely fluent in English or a lecturer from Vietnam—both at the [U.K.] university.

The participants' rationales for acquiring competence in English were individually different. Their responses revealed that the pleasure of acquiring English does not always signal a high degree of identification with native speakers, although Kaori mentioned that she occasionally felt like she was becoming one of them as her English proficiency progressed. While Hanae remarked that she finds the sound and flow of English pleasing and has admiration for native English speakers who make logical arguments, Haruka stated that she would rather emulate non-native English speakers who have become highly qualified professionals with native-like fluency.

Interview Q: バイリンガルスキルを経済的に高い地位を得る手段と考えますか? Do you see bilingual skills as a means of gaining economically advantageous positions?

Interview Q: 英語力を身につけたことでの最大の恩恵は何ですか? What is the greatest benefit of having English proficiency for you?

Hanae: 実際就職に有利でしたけど。最大の恩恵は価値観が広がったというか、視野が広がった。

It proved to be advantageous in the job market. The biggest benefit is that it expanded my perspectives or broadened my horizons.

Yumiko: 経済的価値とか、ステータスとか、一昔前の話。最大の恩恵は視野が広がって、自分のことさえも相対的に見られるようになったこと。

Economic value or status, for instance, is a thing of the past. The greatest benefit is that my horizons were broadened and I learned to see things in perspective, even myself.

Kaori: はっきり自分の意見を言えるようになったこと。どういう目的で英語を学ぶかはまちまちですけど、何であろうとバイリンガルであることに価値はあると。

I am now able to express my opinions explicitly. People learn English for different purposes and whatever it is, it's worth being bilingual.

Haruka: 将来研究職に就きたい。米国や欧州でその分野の研究が進んでいるので、最新の論文を英語で読めて理解できるというのが今は一番のメリット。でも経済的価値以外にも大きい。

I would like to be a researcher in the future. The USA and Europe are more advanced in that field. I can read and understand the latest research articles in English—that is the biggest benefit for now. Values unrelated to economic benefits also matter.

These perceptions of bilingual advantages are also diverse. The interviewees are aware that being bilingual has given them benefits in multiple domains of life, opening doors for appreciating different values. As for material benefits, Hanae reported that her English proficiency was advantageous in the job market and Haruka noted that she has access to the latest information or knowledge that would otherwise be unavailable to her if she is not bilingual.

Regarding non-material benefits, both Hanae and Yumiko emphasised that their horizons were broadened by being competent in English. The participants appreciate both the material and non-material benefits of being bilingual, whether they are related or unrelated to “eliteness.” Kaori noted that being bilingual is a blessing in itself.

RQ3: How do the participants relate linguistic competence in English to a sense of self-empowerment?

Interview Q: 英語を使う時はよりオープンに自己表現ができますか？ Do you think that you can express yourself more openly when you use English?

Interview Q: 英語で考えや感情を表現することでの解放感がありますか？ Do you find it liberating to express your thoughts and feelings in English?

Hanae: 初対面で日本人と話す時は年齢とか、相手の立場とか、敬語がどうか、割と抑えるところもありますけど、ネイティブの方と話す時はそうじゃない。表情も豊かになったりとか、日本語環境ではありえないハグしたりとか。

When talking to a Japanese person for the first time, I feel restrained thinking about age, social position, and how to use honorifics. I do not have to worry about all these when I talk to native [English] speakers. My facial expressions become animated. I even hug, which never happens in a Japanese environment.

Yumiko: 英語だと感じていることをオープンに口にするのは自然なので。ただ、アメリカ人は「politically correct」っていうのを非常に意識しますが、母語じゃないので何が悪いのか分からないこともある。

In English, it is natural to speak openly about what you feel. However, Americans are very conscious of being "politically correct," but since it is not my mother tongue, I sometimes do not know what is wrong.

Kaori: (英語には) 日本語のように敬語とかがないので、英語を話すことで人との距離が近くなっているかなっていう気がします。

My relationship with others seems to get closer when I speak English, which does not have a system of honorifics.

Haruka: 曖昧な言い方を日本語の方が多く知っているの、曖昧な表現を日本語だと躊躇なく使うけど、英語だと結構はっきりものを言っているような。アクションも増えるし、英語だとオープンに表現できるから解放感みたいなものがあったりします。

I use ambiguous expressions without hesitation in Japanese as I have a wider repertoire of ambiguous phrases in Japanese. I am more assertive and use gestures more frequently when I speak English. I can express myself more openly in English, so there is a kind of liberating feeling.

McMahill reported in her study (2001) that some Japanese L2 learners said that they express themselves more explicitly in English than in Japanese. It is interesting to note that this view is shared by the participants in this study, who claim that they sometimes feel more at ease when they speak English and can express themselves more openly or explicitly in English, being freed from the linguistic rules linked with Japanese, such as honorifics. Hanae and Haruka remarked that they are conscious of acting differently when communicating in English, noting they use bodily actions more actively. Haruka also said that she experienced a sense of liberation possibly evoked by the use of English.

Interview Q: 英語力があることで自信や精神的な強さをもてると思えますか？
Do you think that linguistic competence in English affords you confidence or a sense of self-empowerment?

Hanae: 海外に対する怖さがない。英語が話せれば何とかなるという自信、ある程度の。常に目標は高くというか、TOEIC もまだ上（満点）があるし。

I have no anxiety about going abroad. I am confident that I can manage in some way or another since I can speak English. Well, I make it a rule to set lofty goals. I wish to achieve a perfect score in the TOEIC [Test of English for International Communication].

Yumiko: 今は前より自信が持てて、海外で身につけたことをどう日本の社会に還元しようか考えたりします。

Now I feel more confident than before and sometimes think about how I can give back to Japanese society what I have learned abroad.

Kaori: 前は、辛いこととかに直面した時、自分の意見が伝わらないので我慢するしかないという面がありましたけど、今は話せることで、自分はこう思っているとはっきり言える。

Before, when faced with something difficult, I had to grin and bear it because I could not express my opinion [in English]. Now I can speak my mind straightforwardly.

Haruka: 日本で仕事しても、一生その仕事を続けようとは思わない。この先も新たなチャンスを追い求めたい。

Even if I work in Japan, I don't want to keep that job for the rest of my life. I would like to pursue new opportunities in the future.

In their responses, the participants showed a sense of confidence and purposefulness in life. While Hanae is strongly motivated to improve her English proficiency, Haruka is eager to seek new career opportunities in the future. Yumiko believes in making social contributions with her knowledge, earned through her proficiency in English, and Kaori is conscious of an empowered self, which she believes was attained through her linguistic competence in English. Some of their words resonate with the notion of neoliberal subjectivities that value inner competition with oneself to attain goals in life and investment in oneself for empowerment (Brown, 2003).

As McMahon (2001) argues, some Japanese women may acquire English proficiency as a means of obtaining “a weapon for self-empowerment as women in Japan” (p. 332) against the backdrop of unfavourable working environments in Japan for women in terms of pay scales and career opportunities (Yamaguchi, 2019).

Conclusion

This paper reported on a study that examined how certain bilingual Japanese women see their identities and perspectives in a wider socio-cultural context. In this research, the participants' interviews served as rich data sources and subsequent analysis provided a

unique glimpse into what it means to be a late bilingual Japanese woman in an age of globalisation. The interview answers suggest that they are aware of the social, psychological, and lifestyle advantages of being bilingual. Their responses also offered insights into how they see themselves and the world around them once they have achieved the goal of becoming and being bilingual.

RQ1 asked how the participants view cross-cultural experience and its impact on their identity as bilinguals. Their answers suggest that they believe their experience abroad has influenced the way they view the world. Hanae, Kaori, and Haruka reported that they feel like a different person when they speak English, although Yumiko cast doubt on this, saying such a perceived shift in identity may not be directly associated with the use of different languages.

RQ2 asked how they see “native-like competence in English,” “eliteness,” and the benefits of being bilingual. Standard English spoken by native speakers is typically seen as a desirable model for English learners and is often linked with “eliteness” or a higher level of social achievement associated with that variety of English. However, these female bilinguals do not focus solely on emulating native English speakers. Taking all their answers into account, a high level of English proficiency does not necessarily signal a high degree of identification with native speakers or a stronger sense of belonging to English-speaking communities.

While they are aware of commonly held advantages attributed to bilinguals, their answers about the benefits of being bilingual proved to be personal. One of the material benefits mentioned is having more job opportunities. Another is being able to read the latest academic papers in English; being bilingual allows them to gain more knowledge resources. Regarding non-material benefits, they stated that linguistic competence in English helped broaden their horizons or see things in perspective. All in all, the responses indicate that they value the material and non-material benefits of being bilingual, whether or not they are directly connected to “eliteness.”

RQ3 asked how they relate their linguistic competence in English to their sense of self-empowerment. Being capable of accessing information that would be unavailable to them if they were not bilingual and utilising English for their own purposes seems likely to lead to empowerment and self-confidence. Having linguistic competence in English makes them stand out as competitive candidates to potential employers as companies today serve diverse, multilingual populations around the world. Linguistic competence in English also enables them to explore a daring and expressive side of themselves, which helps them navigate their career development in Japan and abroad. Having a core set of personal values or principles that guide their choices and judgments in their daily life, these female bilinguals empowered themselves to choose their own paths without struggling with traditional gender expectations imposed on them in Japanese society.

The four participants talked about the tremendous opportunities they were endowed with throughout their linguistic journeys and I reflected on my own language learning experience. I feel blessed to have had the opportunity to co-construct a sense of belonging to imagined communities: global networks of late bilingual Japanese women.

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Appendix Language Learning History Questionnaire

Participant Name: _____

Q1. Date of Birth: _____

Q2. Education (your current or most recent education level, even if you have not finished the degree) (Circle one):

- Graduate School (PhD/MD/JD)
- High School
- Graduate School (Masters)
- Other (specify):

- College/University (BA/BS)

Q3. Indicate your native language and any other languages you have studied or learned, the age at which you started using each language in terms of listening, speaking, reading, and writing, and the total number of years you have spent using each language.

Language	Listening	Speaking	Reading	Writing	Years of Use*

* You may have learned a language, stopped using it, and then started using it again. Please give the total number of years.

Q4a. Country of Current Residence: _____

Q4b. Country of Birth: _____

Q4c. If 4a and 4b are different, then when did you move to the country where you currently reside? _____

Q5. If you have lived or travelled in countries other than your country of residence or country of birth for over one month, then indicate the name of the country, your period of stay, your age, the language you used, and the frequency of your use of the language for each country.

Country	Period of Stay*	Age	Language	Frequency of Use**
	~			1 2 3 4 5 6 7
				1 2 3 4 5 6 7
				1 2 3 4 5 6 7
	~			1 2 3 4 5 6 7
				1 2 3 4 5 6 7
				1 2 3 4 5 6 7
	~			1 2 3 4 5 6 7
				1 2 3 4 5 6 7
				1 2 3 4 5 6 7
	~			1 2 3 4 5 6 7
				1 2 3 4 5 6 7
				1 2 3 4 5 6 7

* You may have been to one country on multiple occasions, each for a different length of time. Add all the trips together and indicate the total length of stay.

** Please rate according to the following scale (circle the number in the table)

If you used more than two languages during a given stay, indicate the frequency of use for all languages used

<i>Never</i>	<i>Rarely</i>	<i>Sometimes</i>	<i>Regularly</i>	<i>Often</i>	<i>Usually</i>	<i>Always</i>
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Q6. Rate your current ability in terms of listening, speaking, reading, and writing in each of the languages you have studied or learned. Please rate according to the following scale (circle the number in the table):

<i>Very poor</i>	<i>Poor</i>	<i>Limited</i>	<i>Functional</i>	<i>Good</i>	<i>Very good</i>	<i>Native-like</i>
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Language	Listening	Speaking	Reading	Writing
	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Q7. If you have taken any standardized language proficiency tests (e.g., TOEIC), indicate the name of the test, the language assessed, and the score you received. If you do not remember the exact score, then indicate an "Approximate Score" instead.

Test	Language	Score	(Approximate Score)