

Book Reviews

Language Learning, Gender and Desire: Japanese Women on the Move

By Kimie Takahashi

Bristol, UK: Multilingual Matters (2013) xvi + 181 pages

Kimie Takahashi's book is a fascinating ethnographic exploration of young Japanese women learning English in the study abroad context in Australia. It shifts the focus of studies in second language learning away from conventional accounts of motivation, and follows the women's quest for a new identity through transnational travel, and through relationships with Western men. The book, based on Takahashi's doctoral research, opens up contentious issues pertaining to the links between language, racialisation, gender, romance and sexual desire, and has much to offer scholars and teaching practitioners interested in a deeper understanding of the complexities of language learning in an age of global mobility.

The book comprises seven chapters, beginning with an introduction to the research, and ending with a summary of conclusions and implications. The middle five chapters cover a set of interrelated issues and topics: language desire, *ryugaku* (study abroad); desired interlocutors; agency; and going home.

At the outset, the introduction charts a trajectory that is likely to be familiar to most ethnographic researchers, whereby an intended research focus is swept aside by the emergence of more pressing issues in the research site. Takahashi's original plan was to investigate 'language anxiety and motivation' (p. 1) amongst Japanese learners of English in Sydney, Australia. Upon meeting her participants, however, she was struck by the differences in the accounts offered by male and female learners about their reasons for learning English. Whereas male learners were 'straightforward and practical' (p. 1) in their explanations – focusing on the value of English for educational and economic reasons – the female learners provided more 'colourful' explanations that revolved around their *akogare* (desire or longing) for English, for Western countries, and for Western men (p. 1-2). Takahashi's initial assumption that these desires were irrelevant to her research changed in the light of her participants' accounts of the ways in which finding a Western *gaijin* (foreign), English-speaking boyfriend might provide an opportunity to improve their English language proficiency. Takahashi then shows how her research builds on earlier studies of Japanese women's *akogare* for the West and Western masculinity, in particular Karen Kelsky's (2001) work, by focusing more closely on the implications for English language learning. The introduction also sets out the research questions that

guided her study, and provides background information on her five primary participants.

The second chapter, *Language Desire*, discusses the impact of media discourses on Japanese women's language desire. Here, Takahashi shows how language, race and gender come together in the commodified body of the White native-speaker man as the ideal language teacher. Images of White men abound in advertising material for English language courses in Japan, particularly those promoting *eikaiwa* English schools, thereby capitalising on the link between English language learning (ELL) and romantic relationships with 'good-looking' (p. 22) Western men. Takahashi argues that this deliberate conflation of Hollywood-style romance and ELL encourage the consumption of English and White masculinity as commodities and reinforce typical heterosexual identities amongst Japanese adolescent girls.

Chapter 3 discusses the way that *ryugaku* – study abroad – is promoted in Japan as a means of 'reinventing women's identity and creating prospects for a glamorous lifestyle and future career' (p. 61). For Takahashi's participants, the decision to study in Australia was influenced not solely by *akogare* for the West, but by a complex array of practical considerations including financial resources, family situation, age, and career status.

Chapter 4, focuses on the participants' measures of success in study abroad ELL, and their image of the most desirable interlocutors. Of key interest in this chapter is the women's frustrated desire to mix with native-speaker Australians, and their belief that having a Western boyfriend would improve their English language abilities and provide an entrée into a world of 'Western romance and chivalry' (p. 69). Accounts of the distinctions and preferences expressed by the women – based on men's ethnicity and linguistic repertoires – provide an interesting insight into the ways in which romantic desire is shaped by the women's own adoption of anti-Asian racial and linguistic hierarchies. In light of the women's disappointment at the 'racial and linguistic discrimination in Sydney' (p. 67), it seems ironic that their own racial and linguistic preferences and prejudices are so firmly expressed. This is a point that I thought could warrant further examination.

In Chapter 5, Takahashi explores how the women participants exercised their agency to extend their opportunities for ELL through their choice of accommodation and, for some, their decision to work during their *ryugaku*. In this chapter, we are again reminded of the difficulties and disappointments experienced by students who study abroad, and Takahashi suggests that racism and linguistic discrimination led some to 'believe that Australian society did not welcome Asian non-English speaking workers' (p. 110).

Chapter 6 discusses the participants' apprehensions about returning to Japan. A

central theme here is the change that has been wrought in the learners' sense of identity as a consequence of their international experiences. Far from feeling a new sense of empowerment and confidence, Takahashi found that the women's expectations of home-coming 'were increasingly characterised by a sense of uncertainty, confusion, anxiety, and even fear. In short no one wanted to go home' (p. 116). Fears were expressed about the possibilities of maintaining their EL abilities, and their newfound cosmopolitan identities, in Japan as 'a monolingual society' (p. 117) where gender and age discrimination could impose significant limitations on their career prospects.

The *Conclusion* in Chapter 7 brings together the central themes of the book: the romanticised link between English and Western men; the aspirational meanings attached to *ryugaku* in Australia; the barriers to engagement with White native-English-speaking Australians; and the fears for maintaining language and identity transformations after return to the home country. Takahashi argues that although language desire had a long lasting dynamic in her participants' narratives, its actual forms and effects were continually reshaped according to the women's experiences with their contact interlocutors and communities. Romantic desire promoted in various media can act as a powerful catalyst in language learning, but the effects of this desire on language learning are shaped by the individual participants' real-life experiences with a range of men from different racial, socioeconomic, age, and linguistic backgrounds in Australia. On the basis of her research findings, Takahashi calls for language teaching in Japan to provide learners with opportunities for critical analyses of media discourses that stereotype and commodify Western masculinity, and exploit Japanese women's manufactured desires.

Overall, Takahashi's research points to the significant effects of racial, gendered and sexualised stereotypes on Japanese learners of English language. The book therefore provides a valuable contribution to theories and accounts of second language learning which, until recently, have paid insufficient attention to mobilising discourses of romantic language desire.

Reference:

Kelsky, K. (2001). *Women on the verge: Japanese women, Western dreams*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Reviewed by Roslyn Appleby, University of Technology, Sydney

Bilingualism: A Social Approach**By Monica Heller (ed.)****Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan (2007) xv + 358 pages.**

Bilingualism: A Social Approach, is a collection of articles on bilingualism studies in the Palgrave Advances in Linguistics series. The main purpose of Heller's edited volume is to challenge the dominant discourses and ideologies of bilingualism and multilingualism. The book attempts to move away from approaches that focus on forms and codes that define languages and their communities. Rather, Heller underscores the importance of looking at languages as social phenomena. Languages are shaped by the social practices of communities and socio-political ideologies of nation-states. This is further complicated by individual beliefs about how these forces interact on various micro and macro levels of society. Viewing bilingualism from a social perspective allows us to see various other non-linguistic issues being negotiated within nations themselves, as well as across diverse global communities.

Under a 'social' framework, Heller and her contributors argue that the study of bilingualism is not a study of acquiring and using language systems. If we look at languages as being fundamentally social in nature, then we must also re-shape our previous notions that rely on languages as whole and tightly bounded entities. The book takes a critical stance on previous 'core' linguistic definitions of languages and bilingualism, which typically privilege languages over speakers, communities over people, and language ideology over speaker identity and social practices. Defining bilingual individuals and bilingual communities then becomes difficult, due to a virtually unlimited variety of social, cultural, or linguistic characteristics.

With the rapid expansion of ideas and practices around the world (often referred to as globalization), nations, communities, and individuals face the problem of how to deal with bilingualism in the 21st century. The movement of new material and non-material resources gives us reason to pause and reconsider dominant, largely taken-for-granted language ideologies. The contributing authors of each chapter present various situations in which the idea of language itself is being challenged by individuals, communities, and/or nations in different ways. The book is divided into four sections.

Part One, entitled Bilingualism, Nation, State, and Capitalism, canvasses "relations between bilingualism and ideologies of state and nation from the nineteenth century to the present day" (p. 16). The authors argue that language and social interactions are shown to be tied to the discourses of political nations and states. Colonialism and neo-colonialism are shown to be historically rich areas for viewing linguistic resources

being negotiated in the struggle over citizenship. Alongside nation-states, speakers co-constructively are shown to influence decisions about, when, where, and who can or should speak certain languages. The nation-state is shown to be an important historical force for bilingualism because nation states can legitimize or prohibit the use of specific languages. Furthermore, nations can deny citizenship as well as control various material and non-material resources available to certain individuals or communities. Bilingualism often is seen as a deficit, or a problematic phenomenon that goes against nation-state ideology: a nation that is defined around one culture and one language. Stroud sums it up nicely by stating that in the past “hybridity in language [was] equated with contamination and ignorance” (p. 25). The thrust of Part One is that nations need to implement systems that positively deal with multilingualism and multiculturalism, rather than marginalize or alienate speakers with multiple linguistic, cultural, and historic backgrounds.

The State, the Economy, and their Agencies in late Modernity is the title of Part Two. The authors here discuss specifically how the expansion of multiple languages and cultures in modern nations have changed ideologies and presented new challenges to the regulation of citizenship. In order to compete in the modern world, nations have found themselves needing to redefine citizenship and rethink ways to legitimize multiple social practices. Nations are shown struggling to balance traditional ideologies of one nation (one people, one language, and one culture) with ideas of “globalization” and the realities of multilingualism. Language is shown to be a commodity with real and symbolic value, with certain varieties privileged over others. As a consequence, the languages a person speaks often have profound social and economic consequences.

Furthermore, this section also highlights the fact that nation-states are not the only forces that negotiate the reproduction of language and culture. Often problems are left up to people themselves to resolve. For example, educators need to cater for children from diverse backgrounds, different home languages and cultures. Education institutions are key players in deciding the role language plays in general education policies, further deeming what languages, cultures, and general knowledge are reproduced (and thus ‘privileged’) in society. Regarding the role that English language education plays world-wide, Martin-Jones comments that, “English is seen as a part of a ‘package’ bound up with other dimensions of ‘modernization’” (p. 177). Being or becoming bilingual is now one major part of many educational agendas, marking a major shift away from more traditional discourses and ideologies of bilingualism.

The third part of the book is titled *Identity Practices*, and it effectively examines how bilinguals manage their multiple identities in social interaction. The studies in this section look at how the multiple identities of bilinguals are an extremely complex phenomenon.

Bilinguals consistently challenge historical, social, linguistic, and cultural categories. In this section, it is argued that power, the material or symbolic force that other individuals or collective ideologies place on people, is a constant force in the reproduction of language socialization and legitimatization. Rather than viewing bilingualism as the acquisition of a set of formal language codes, the bilingual/bicultural person is both a complex and contradictory citizen of a larger collective society. Bilingual members are shown to draw on a wide range of linguistic and social resources to form identities and challenge various roles in society.

In part three, Bailey argues that code-switching is a complicated activity that can serve very different functions within talk. Not only can code-switching be an act of resistance of certain political and historical power, it can carry several meanings within talk, positioning the speaker within a larger framework of self and other-ascribed identities. By doing this, it is argued that bilinguals create third spaces for themselves as they redefine categories such as gender, culture, and social class. Rather than codes that simply carry meaning, languages are shown to be hyper-complex acts of social positioning.

The final part of the volume, titled *Linguistic Form and Linguistic Practice*, challenges the notion of languages as autonomous systems. It advocates the need to examine bilinguals and bilingual talk as dynamically co-constructed in the real social actions of speakers. Peter Auer's contribution in this section argues that a monolingual bias in research has limited our understanding of talk in interaction. This section also highlights emerging areas of research into code-switching and code-mixing. The authors conclude that bilingualism is *not* the mixing of two different monolingual codes of talk. If it were, in an analysis of conversation, it would always be quite clear when and why speakers code-switch. Speakers code-switch and code-mix for many different reasons, some of which are not identifiable unless we prioritize speakers over languages.

To summarize, the contributors to this volume frequently challenge dominant discourses and ideologies pertaining to languages and multilingualism. The term "Bilingualism" is shown in this book to carry with it a layer of inherent inequality, ambiguity, and uncertainty. In short, this book attempts to challenge a longstanding monolingual paradigm that still permeates various interdisciplinary research fields.

Heller's *Bilingualism: A Social Approach* is an innovative and critical departure point for considering the socio-political dimensions of bilingualism and multilingualism. This edited volume will be of great interest to those wanting a comprehensive theoretical discussion about bilingualism in the 21st century. When looking at issues in bilingualism, often language is not what is at stake, nor is language the problem. In that sense, Heller

and her contributors ultimately see bilingualism as the study of the political and language as the study of the social.

Reviewed by Lance Stimp, Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University, Oita, Japan