

# What should we do to protect our language identities?

The impact of society, beliefs, and the education system

Maria Yamazaki



## About the author

*I was born in Japan as a child of Brazilian parents, coincidentally in the year that had a football world cup in Japan/Korea when Brazil became world champion. I speak Japanese, Portuguese, and English and I'm a student at Chuo University studying law and international politics. My area of interests in research is about protecting minority rights so in my first year I researched the discrimination against LGBT persons and focused on "gay marriage" in Japan. From my own experiences as a multilingual person who grew up in Japan, in my second-year seminar, I wanted to research about language issues, specifically the protection of language identities. That is the focus of this academic blog.*

## Introduction

Language identity is a type of personal identity that is created from our language history and this is a very important part of our lives. For me, the question of language identity had a great effect in the creation of my own identity, and that process made me who I am right now. Even though I didn't know what language identity meant exactly at the time, it played an important role in my life.

As a person who grew up in a society which doesn't use my mother tongue, I had many struggles in terms of using another

language. The elementary and junior high schools I went to in Gunma didn't have good programs to help children with more than one language to use two languages. The school system of separating students who didn't have Japanese as their first language made me have a feeling of exclusion. And from the age of 10 or so, I started to think it was embarrassing to use Portuguese in front of Japanese people. I also tried hard to be "Japanese" so I could be the same as everyone. This need to be monolingual and monocultural stopped me from being proud of myself: **Without knowing, I was excluding myself from speaking a different language for a long time.**

All this had a big impact on my sense of identity and raised many personal and complex questions for me. In this academic blog I want to focus on my personal

language experiences in relation to social systems and beliefs to do with nationalism. I also share the experiences of another young person who, like me, went to school in Japan, but whose school environment was quite different from mine. What follows is based on my autumn research project in my second-year seminar on Language Issues in Society.

When I first started going more deeply into these experiences, I started to become interested in the connection of identity and multilingualism. Earlier in 2022, I had researched about issues in multilingual countries. I had expected that, when the society is multilingual, there should be several mixes of language identities for people who use more than one language. In addition, as a politics major, the relationship between language identity and nationalism had a big appeal for me. How do beliefs and ideas about nationalism affect language users' identities? Is there a simple national identity for people like me who are multilingual? Those questions were really important for me in understanding language identity, so nationalism is one of the essential themes in this academic blog post.

I have had a struggle with my own personal and national identity since I was a young child. I have often asked myself: "Am I Japanese/Brazilian or Brazilian/Japanese?" According to my own experiences, **does it mean that somehow, the society, and the situation around a person can harm a person's language identities?** I have come to understand that there are several factors which may have the potential to build a wall and limit our language identities.

### *What is language identity?*

We cannot underestimate the importance of language identity. According to my research, I found that it is a type of identity that is created based on language. I also learnt that language is not only an individual question. It has a strong connection with society, the feelings and attitudes of people around you, and cultural norms.

Stan Grant, an Australian journalist who writes and talks about indigenous issues and his Aboriginal identity, has commented, "*Languages and names are markers of identity.*"<sup>1</sup> According to Grant, language identity is not just a simple factor, but it shows who we are and where we are. For me, language identity is one of the most

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<sup>1</sup> Grant (2016)

important parts of my own identity. My first language is Portuguese, and then I learned Japanese when I was 3-5 years old, so I grew up with two languages from when I was very little.

Understanding the significance of those two languages was a challenge for me. We use language to speak, think, communicate, express our thoughts, ideas, and opinions ... and to show ourselves to others. When you want to do something, the first thing you do is probably to think, and language and thought are deeply connected with each other. So, most of the time, language is an important factor in our daily lives. We can also say that our social life depends on our language use and the communities we interact with. Basically, our daily lives are dominated by our language use. But in what ways were my language choices restricted or not? Let's think together about language choices, and language hierarchy in society.

## **Language choice and the impact of social systems**

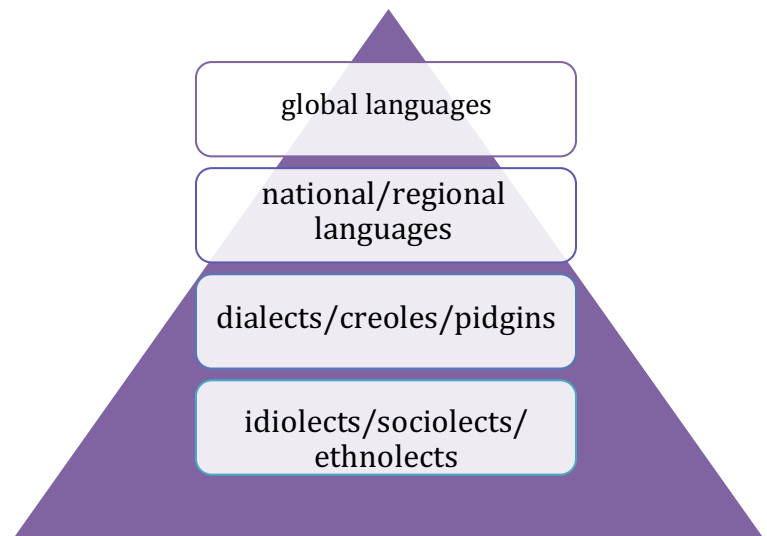
To put it simply, language choice is the choice about what language one will use, but it is not a free choice that individuals make. Language choice can shift depending on both individual and societal factors.

### ***Societal restrictions on language choice***

According to my research, language choice is both individual and societal. In sociolinguistics, when people mention the word “language choices”, they are talking about individual speakers’ decision-making within a language (Aoyama & Denton, 2020) — the choices that a person makes to use one language or another. However, societies also restrict language choices that people can make. As you can see in the figure below, language choice means not only the language which will be spoken but also the languages that will have official support, and which are taught in the education system. Society restricts language choice in this way, for example:

- What/How many languages will be used in this society & when they will be used?
- How many different languages are included in a language education system?
- How many different languages are recognized and included in a public spaces/places and information way in a society? ... etc.

This figure<sup>2</sup> shows the hierarchy between languages in terms of language choice which helped us understand how language choices are created in society.



What stands at the top of the hierarchy is global languages, which today is primarily known as English. According to my research, there is no official definition of global language, but it refers to language that is learned and spoken internationally. Also, global language is defined by its usefulness on a global scale for economic and trade purposes (Tyers, 2016). The second level is national and regional languages, which can include the main languages of the society (for example, Japanese in Japan, Portuguese in Brazil, or Bahasa Indonesia in Indonesia). The third level is dialects (for example, Osaka-ben, or Yamaguchi-ben), creoles and pidgins, and the bottom level is idiolects, sociolects, ethnolects which includes various kinds of languages that individuals or small groups and communities use. In Japan, nearly everybody speaks Japanese, and young people rarely have a choice about the first foreign language that they learn. It is English. **So, people's basic language choices are restricted unless they have interest in learning another language or they use some different languages in their family.**

### *Individual restrictions on language choice*

For an individual person, the meaning of language choice is simpler. Each person can have multiple language identities depending on language choices and uses. However, this flexibility depends on your society's language hierarchy, which affects the choices that you can make. Sometimes the restrictions in a society can prevent you from freely making individual language choices. In my case, I started with Portuguese at home, then through playing with children at kindergarten I

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<sup>2</sup> Tyers (2016)

began to use Japanese, and later I began to learn English at school. Although there was a Portuguese class at school, I did not take it because it was Portuguese only and the children in that class did not interact in Japanese with Japanese speakers. The children in the class were isolated within the school community, and my parents wanted me to be bilingual. The school's language policies, my parents' wishes, and my future social prospects acted to restrict and support my language choices.

Strangely enough as I grew up in a monocultural society in Gunma, I still could live with two totally different cultures. However, even for me, accepting the use of another language became difficult as I went through the school system and learnt that monolingualism is expected. It became so normal for me to speak only Japanese, that I thought it was weird to use a different language. As a teenager I wanted to use only Japanese, and I insisted on this to my parents a lot. On my parents' side, they didn't want me to use Japanese at home because they were hoping for me not to forget and lose Portuguese. I respected their wishes and managed to use only Portuguese at home, but it was still really annoying at the time!

### ***Having an international education in Japan, Tokyo***

While doing my research, I started to be interested in the story of a student who had to come through a situation similar to me. She spoke different languages at home and school like me, but with a totally different school system unlike mine. She is a high school student in Tokyo, but she has studied only at international schools. Her name is AH (pseudonym). She was born in Japan to Japanese parents. However, from kindergarten, at a very young age, she grew up surrounded by English. She has been to 3 different international schools in Tokyo, and when I interviewed her, she was 16 years old, a freshman at an international high school. In the school which she is going to now, teachers and students use Japanese frequently compared to other international schools, but the previous two schools were mainly in English, so she spent her recent school life mostly using English. At home she used Japanese and then at school she had education and interaction in English with other students.

*“There were many times when I asked myself which language is my mother tongue; Japanese or English?”*

This is what AH said about her own language identity. Studying wasn't the bad part because she loved learning languages, but the high amount of study, the pressure, and the other kids calling her “ガリ勉” (= *gariben*, which means nerd in Japanese) were a hard part of using two languages for her. Sometimes It made her feel uncomfortable learning English, but she said she is grateful now for having studied English.

*“I think I am very lucky to have the opportunity to say my opinion in English. There are some opinions that can be expressed in English that cannot be felt in Japanese, and there are somethings about language that can be spoken only because I studied English.”*

AH's story was very impactful for me. She had an opportunity to be bilingual even though she was living in a monolingual society; in clear contrast to me, she could become bilingual because she spoke Japanese at home but not at school. Since she interacts with people in her age in English, at the time she was more comfortable using English than Japanese, which is her mother tongue. It's funny that the “language shock” we faced was the same even though we went to schools with completely different systems; while mine was a rural and conservative school, hers was a metropolitan “international” school. **Even when we are trying to make a choice for ourselves, social restrictions (at this point coming from the schools) and people around us (parents' decision in a young age, other students who we interacted with, and teachers) can cause a huge impact on our language identities as individuals.**

## Strong beliefs and exclusion

### *Nationalism, patriotism and language identities*

As I mentioned, sometimes the idea of monolingualism can create a feeling of exclusion about using another language. It makes people think that their language has the priority, which I associate with the sense of strong mono-nationalism. So, what would be the connection between nationalism and language identity?

Language is the most important way to create a sense of group identity. From my research I concluded that language, politics, and culture are not separated, but they are all mixed together and they occupy an important part in our lives. One of the well-known beliefs which occupies an important role in language, politics, and cultures is nationalism.

Nationalism is often used to bring people together and to have a common national identity. However, it can also be exploited to create separation and difference between people. One example is with language. It is not rare to see people discouraging other language speakers to use only their language in their country; in Japan people say, “If you live in Japan, you MUST use Japanese” or, “Why would I have to learn another language since I will live only in Japan for the rest of my life?”.

In fact, what I saw in my life was not only the exclusion by society as I mentioned before, but also by the people around me. When I used a different language, I felt several “EYES” looking at me. Thinking about this now, those people around me might simply have been amazed that I was using different languages, but for me as a child, those creepy “looks” I had to face when I was speaking Portuguese, made me feel insecure about using it. Even though I had been using Japanese five seconds before, in the time I used Portuguese, suddenly, I was being positioned as an outsider.

In my opinion, believing strongly in nationalism can limit and be detrimental for people's identities. This belief may make people have a strong sense of mono-nationalism and even a hatred for speakers of other languages. **I have come to recognize that people's beliefs sometimes play a bigger role in the creation of language identities than other social factors.**

## Conclusion

To sum up, there are several factors which can prevent us from developing our multilingual language identities: the language choice in society, its system, the beliefs of the people around us... and so on. How our language identity will be created depends on our society and the people around us. If the society, and the situation around a person can harm a person's language identity, yes, it can have an impact at some point. If someone or something stands in your way one time, it will be difficult for you to try again and overcome it. Just once, if you lose being proud of your language, you will be scared and try to eliminate your identity. If you stay in the same situation, it will be very hard to escape from there. The same thing happened to me, and the only way to escape from that kind of mindset was to put



myself into a different environment by going to university in a metropolitan area where people are much less judgmental than in my hometown in Gunma.

Language identity occupies a very important part of our lives. It is yourself, your society, your culture, and your people. **To respect everyone's language identities, there is one thing that we have to protect: freedom of choice.** Accepting language diversity affects the way of language identities that we have. We have a right to choose what languages we want to use and what languages we want to learn without being disturbed by our society, and the situation around us. Social systems and ideologies should not have to threaten this. If we show our respect to our choices, there will be fewer problems to create our language identities.

At the end of this blog, I hope you have understood more about language identities than when you started reading this. The most important thing that I want to show is to respect yourself and your language choices, so that you can protect your language identities in different stages of your life.

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