Language Learning, Gender and Desire: Japanese Women on the Move
Kimie Takahashi (2013)

Reviewed by Keiko Todo

This volume examines Japanese women’s attitudes in the context of second language acquisition, by studying the linguistic and social behaviour of a group of young Japanese women living in Australia. The framework proposed focuses on the notion of what the author calls ‘desire’ (akogare in Japanese; cf. Kelsky 2001) as a motivating factor behind the studied group’s involvement in learning English. The volume argues that desire comes into existence through Japanese women’s admiration of English language and Western lifestyle, and their wish to form alternative identities. It is based on critical ethnographic research, using data which was collected between 2001 and 2005; during this period the author examined various groups of women, the most important one being a community of five Japanese women. Takahashi explores these women’s experiences of using and learning English, examining sources including interviews, fieldnotes, phone conversations and email exchanges, as well as discourses drawn from media sources.

Chapter 1 outlines the objectives of research and the theoretical notion of desire, as well as Japanese public discourse on this notion; it also introduces the group studied. As a starting point the author refers to the anthropologist Karen Kelsky’s work (1996, 2001, 2008); however, Kelsky’s research on desire is limited to Japanese women with high social status, and it neglects the context of language learning. Takahashi
imports desire into the context of learning English as a second language, taking on Piller’s concept of ‘language desire’, introduced in the monograph *Bilingual Couples Talk* (2002), and which Piller and Takahashi redefined together in 2006.

Piller and Takahashi (2006) conceptualise language learning as a potential source of different desires, namely:

1. desire for identity transformation
2. desire to master a desired language; and/or
3. desire to form friendships/romances with speakers of the target language.

These desires tend to intersect with each other. Takahashi explores the dialectic relationship between public discourses and subjective agency in shaping Japanese women’s desires, as well as the way in which these desires make their ways into the learning and use of the target language (in general: English). In the present book, Takahashi relies on her joint work with Piller in order to conduct an empirical inquiry into the phenomenon of desire and the ways in which desire intersects with Japanese women’s life trajectories.

Chapter 2 examines Japanese commercial discourses on the desire for English language learning. The author argues that these discourses are centred on ‘whiteness’ (i.e. Caucasian features associated with the learning of English), which is a key marketing strategy for educational companies such as English language schools and publishers of educational magazines. In essence, companies involved in English language learning claim that English language offers a means to transcend racial boundaries. Learning English thus involves the acquisition of ‘whiteness’, and this learning process includes, importantly, acquisition of the way in which white women conduct their romantic lives. Romantic life is clearly a fundamental element in ‘selling’ English language learning in Japan. Young female language learners are presented with the image of goodlooking and chivalrous white Western men who are positioned as both desirable English teachers and romantic partners. Interestingly, Hollywood film stars and Western sport celebrities often feature in marketing materials, and it is implicitly communicated to consumers that learning English opens up the opportunity for them to find partners like these celebrities. Due to the romantic marketing approach the consumers themselves are also implicitly positioned, in a sense, as persons with ‘sexy’, provocative and demure femininity. This sophisticated discursive creation of identities can be captured with particular clarity in the case of educational genres which are designed to improve English proficiency through the power of romantic relationship.
In chapter 3 the author examines what studying abroad implies for Japanese women, and how language desire influences their decision to leave Japan. When advertising overseas study opportunities, English-speaking countries in the West are represented as desirable destinations. Thus, for many young Japanese women, leaving the country for such places symbolises fundamental opportunities of gaining new identities and opening prospects for a new and glamorous lifestyle with prospects of a great career. The interviewees Takahashi approached echoed these notions, which demonstrates the important role of media on the target group. Indeed, these women seemed to have been significantly motivated by their desire to break through unfavourable identities or inequal circumstances in their social lives. Young Japanese women are under social pressure to make the ‘right’ choices in terms of timing their life circles, including study, work and marriage; skilfully targeted media discourse thus provides a solution to break out from this robotic lifestyle. This is a realistic solution in the sense that going overseas to learn English is affordable and convenient to most Japanese. In spite of this clear relationship between decision making and media discourse, Takahashi also notes that this is a complex phenomenon because media is simply one – albeit important – factor that influences Japanese young women who decide to go abroad to study English.

Chapter 4 examines gendered discourses, which represent dating with Western men as the greatest ‘method’ to achieve success in English language learning. For example, the participants whom Takahashi interviewed stated that they wanted to find Western partners when they started to learn English. When they arrived in Australia, they realised that they did not have any opportunity to practise English conversation, due to their temporary resident status, East Asian identity and limited English skill. They were also (or, perhaps, consequently) exposed to different forms of racial and/or linguistic discrimination. It is thus not surprising that from the perspectives of these women, finding native speaker men emerged as an ideal resource to practice English, and thus attain their goals. The ideal of the language partner, as the interviewees reveal, is a fairly complex one; the Japanese women interviewed were not simply looking for white partners. First, the language-teacher boyfriend should, ideally, not be able to speak Japanese, in order for these women to be able to practice English without being ‘hindered’ by counter-teaching their partners. Second, the boyfriends-to-be should have good social status and excellent physical appearance. What the Japanese interviewees said seems to accord with the way in which (pro-Western) Japanese media discourse represents white men.
Chapter 5 examines agency in Japanese English language learning, by exploring the construction of the social spaces of home and work, as represented through English learning-related materials. As the author argues, media in Japan represent white native English-speaking host families and flatmates, as well as work places, as ideal settings for English-language acquisition. Such discourses influenced the participants who, upon arriving at Australia, were full of desire to use and learn English at the homes and workplaces of native Australians. However, in the long run this understanding continuously altered at the intersection of their financial needs, identity, non-linguistic desires and the power relations experienced in particular contexts. The notion of agency, together with language desire, offers complex and nuanced understandings of the participants’ decision to use or ignore English in particular social contexts. Some participant comments indicate the participants’ resentment towards the environment in which their desires were denied on the basis of their linguistic and racial identities – by representatives of the society they wished to integrate into. According to some participants’ accounts, racism and linguistic discrimination which they experienced in Sydney emerged as closely linked, if not identical, phenomena (Piller 2012; Piller and Takahashi 2010a, 2010b).

Chapter 6 focuses on the participants’ increasingly ambivalent feelings about returning to Japan. In Japan the media represent Japanese women who return to the country as successful people; furthermore, in Japanese public discourses, foreign countries tend to be associated with temporariness whereas Japan is represented as the only legitimate physical space for the native Japanese. Accordingly, studying abroad is positioned as a ‘return ticket’ to Japan. However, what the participants told Takahashi contradicts such normative views. Some participants felt that they no longer fully belong to their home towns, neither can they have the same relationships with their friends and even families as before. It was often the case that in their hometowns they found it impossible to use the experiences they gained in Sydney and to maintain their cosmopolitan, English-speaking identities. Also, they felt that they were no longer purely ‘Japanese’, and upon returning to Japan they had a strong sense of alienation. Whilst they had to leave Australia as their permanent residency and work permit expired, or in some cases they had no more financial support, they were eager to explore future opportunities to go abroad. This desire for transnational mobility is mentioned in their accounts and their stories illustrate the complex connection between language desire, migration, emotional attachments and sense of home.
In chapter 7 the author conceptualises language desire from two interrelated perspectives: first, Takahashi describes this phenomenon as an outcome of various constructive processes (historical contexts, discourse on women’s life course and media) and then she examines the possible effects of this phenomenon on individuals’ life choices, mainly their wish to emigrate to other countries. The participants’ decisions provide a bridge between language desire and migration desire. Takahashi argues that examining the intersection of these desires is important. Previous research on second language learning has failed to address this connection because second language learning researchers tend to see language learners as bound to their home countries. The few studies that have examined middle-class Japanese international students with gender perspective pay little attention to their desire for future international migration. Current international migration theory offers only limited understanding of the impact of language ideologies on different types of study abroad and the future migration patterns of young women.

Takahashi’s book provides a good contribution to the field of gender research, and it is of interest to those who are involved in the examination of gender in the context of language learning. The work has a clear structure and accessible style, and the author draws on thought-provoking data. As a native speaker of Japanese, I found it particularly appealing that Takahashi brought in cultural-insider understandings of language behaviour in her analysis, while she avoided exoticising the subject of her research. A further point of interest is that ‘Takahashi provides an alternative perspective to describe ‘international life’ in the Japanese cultural context. Traditionally, Japanese public discourse on international life is limited to people who gain experience abroad but who return to the country, and Takahashi shows another, important aspect of Japanese international lives by examining the lives of those who do not repatriate.

I did, however, find it somewhat problematic that Takahashi uses both Japanese and English words in an interchangeable way to describe certain phenomena – for example, desire is referred to as both ‘desire’ and ‘akogare’. This seems to be problematic: the English ‘desire’ has an inherent sexual connotation, and this would imply that ‘language desire’ is also inherently sexual – while in fact the findings of this book suggest that sexuality is only one (albeit important) potential aspect of Japanese women’s English language learning. On the other hand, akogare has a more neutral semantic meaning than desire, and it can occur in the context of foreign language learning without any problem. Thus, one
is kept wondering as to whether it is appropriate to directly implant an expression like *akogare* into English academic discourse. Recent research on the metapragmatics of expressions which describe certain manifestations of culture-specific behaviour (see e.g. Haugh 2013) calls for a more self-reflexive approach to terminological issues. Further, the book seems to be slightly repetitive and there are also some highly confusing editorial issues. For example, on p. 106 the author promises to deliver research in chapter nine, but the book does not have such a chapter; this is a recurrent problem, and it is somewhat frustrating for the reader that the book contains various references to research results which are not included in the volume.

Irrespective of these shortcomings, however, this book is highly recommended to anyone who is interested in language and gender in Japanese society.

References


