The Quest for Sociolinguistic Invisibility in Contemporary Japan: The Shift of Linguistic and Cultural Repertoires in the Context of Social and Geographical Mobility

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Introduction

Japan has been often perceived as a monolingual and culturally homogeneous country. It is only in the past few decades that the many aspects of theories on the Japanese (*nihonjinron*) have been critically addressed if not outright debunked by scholars (Burgess 2007; Doak; Murphy-Shigematsu; Yoshino). Beyond the lens of ideology, contemporary Japan is home to a plethora of languages, cultures and ethnic groups (Heinrich & Yamashita). In addition to this linguistic and cultural diversity, modernist views on traditional notions of nation-states must now confront the forces of globalization. With the advancement of instantaneous communication technology and intercontinental travel

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being as accessible as ever, Japan is presented with the challenge to both shape and be shaped by the flows typical of the age of globalization. As a result, issue related to 'the coming together of different cultures' (*tabunkakyōsei*) stand at the forefront of current debates and preoccupations among scholars, policy makers and the general population (Burgess 2012). Despite phenomena including migration and the strength of Japan's cultural power abroad contributing to its internationalization, this paper argues that it is possible to identify processes of exclusion and inclusion that are made manifest in many aspects of contemporary society. Through a series of examples, this study highlights how possessing certain sociolinguistic traits can be critical for social and geographical mobility. At the same time, the study argues that one's own sociolinguistic profile does not only effect, but is also informed by, social and geographical dislocation. This research considers the duality between centre and periphery, the transition between levels of educations, the discourse on ethnic minorities as well as the perception of *nikkei* returnees and foreigners as potential sites of struggle where sociolinguistic invisibility is not only a desirable trait but also potentially correlated to social and geographical mobility.

Being sociolinguistically invisible means to be able to reproduce the linguistic repertoire that is considered most prestigious and widely accepted. This has the benefit of signifying one's own affiliation with a group or certain category in a way that is easily recognizable by others belonging to said group, at the cost of silencing other traits (Blommaert 2010). Demonstrating mastery of the language (and associated cultural practices) that is considered 'standard', implies the existence of 'deviant' categories as well. Japan is no exception and if scholars still have to confront themselves with the myth of monolingual Japan it is because it can be seen as an example of successful language planning and standardization (Heinrich 2012). On the one hand, the modernist views that the policy makers who constructed a national language (*kokugo*) adopted during the last century indeed served to make of Japan a highly literate country. On the other hand, the pivotal role that central institutions have had in the process of making Japan a modernized nation left a linguistic and cultural legacy that is capable of influencing contemporary discourses on several internal and international issues.

Regardless, it is people who remain at the core of culturally situated and structural dynamics. Attitudes towards language and culture can be recognized, produced and reproduced both on the local and the national level by institutions, families and individuals. Intercepting these attitudes and their social actors means to intercept societal processes of erasure that are happening against the backdrop of wider social and geographical transformations that are occurring in both rural and urban spaces in contemporary Japan.

Previous studies have highlighted how language, registers and styles play a role in the organization of social life and cognition (Pennycook 2012). In contexts of mobility, certain language varieties can represent both a form of capital enabling upwards social and geographical movements or a potential source of struggle for not being recognized as valuable resources (Hawkins & Cannon; Park & Wee; Trudell). Taking on matters of mobility enable us to examine structural inequalities as they develop in a globalizing world against traditional views on nation-states (Beck). The emerging duality is that of the centre and the periphery. The standardized and the deviant become associated with certain social and geographical spaces. It is when they overlap through mobility that a vertical stratified image of power is revealed. In these spaces, language becomes a commodity in what Bourdieu imagined as a marketplace, with people competing within it for profit and with certain linguistic varieties having less societal power than others. Japan too is said to present characteristics of the centre versus periphery paradigm when it comes to ethnic minorities and the perception of language varieties (Doerr; Shimoda; Suzuki).

Issues related to migration, centre/periphery and transitions between levels of education often imply the movement of people and their resources. Thus, the theoretical framework from the sociolinguistics of globalization (Blommaert 2010) is used for the analysis here. This approach takes into consideration the changes of value and function of sociolinguistic resources in contexts of mobility. The hypothesized correlation between the presence (and absence) of certain repertoires and social and geographical mobility in Japan is explained through the tools that Blommaert defined as “scales”, “orders of indexicality” and

"polycentricity" (6ff). Blommaert argues that linguistic resources move across what he defined as 'scales', forming layered vertical spatiotemporal dimensions when interacting with one another. The movement from one scale to the other implies a change in function, structure and meaning. It is a movement through a hierarchically layered system in which higher scales (such as institutions and norms) tend to prevail over lower scales. This view results in structured semiotized metaphors of space and time. This is represented as Fig. 1, below.

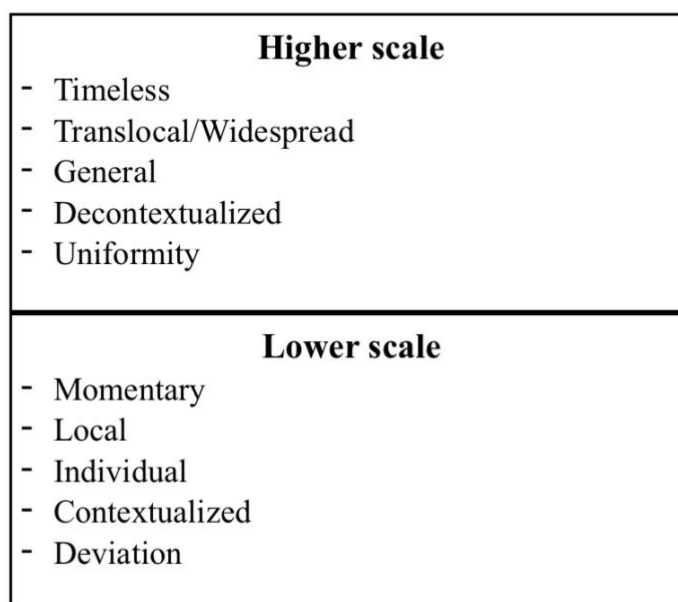

Fig.1. Representation of high and low sociolinguistic scales (Blommaert 2010)

Each scale organizes different patterns of normativity. Cumulatively, they dictate what counts as standard, acceptable or fitting, including in relation to language. Linguistic resources become mobile holding different potentials when moving through different "orders of indexicality." (Blommaert 2007). In other words, certain linguistic choices may work in a context but not so much in another. This implies patterns of authority, evaluation and control, and ultimately contributes to establishing processes of exclusion and inclusion by real or perceived

others. Within this theoretical framework, authority is said to emanate from 'centres' that people orient to when communicating. These can be either real or perceived bodies of social and/or cultural authority that Bakhtin called 'super addressees'. Blommaert (2007) argues that the environments in which humans communicate are almost always polycentric, meaning that it is possible to identify multiple centres that one is orienting to. The combination of topic, style and place are all part of a semiotic package that contributes to organize roles and identities by dictating what counts as appropriate within a specific environment. Given that real or perceived norms and criteria of appropriateness emanate from these centres, one can follow or violate them at any given time depending on the orientation. This may be done either intentionally, by accident, or because one simply cannot behave differently. Thus, analyzing sociolinguistic phenomena in the context of globalization is useful to understand those processes of inclusion and exclusion that emerge when linguistic resources are inserted into patterns of mobility.

Centre and periphery; Standardization and deviation

The concepts of centre and periphery, whether of political or geographical nature, have been historically associated with Japan. Historians have recognized many configurations during the course of its history and today the northern region of Hokkaidō and the southern archipelago of the Ryūkyū are said to be facing challenges typical of this dichotomy (Lewis). As minority languages (often linked to liminal territories) are faced with the risk of extinction (Heinrich, 2012) and the demographic crisis is emptying rural areas (Matanle Sato), Tōkyō further consolidates its dual role as capital of the country and global city. Thus, phenomena correlated to what could be identified as the centre-periphery duality are made manifest in contemporary Japan.

Tōkyō is the centre for politics, finance, and is the chief transportation hub of Japan as well as being a gateway for international traffic, so it is an ideal physical centre. It has been so since the days of old Edo (1603-1867) when it became apparent that the Kantō region was destined to host the new capital. The centrality of the city is reflected in matters of language as well. During the time of shoguns (military rulers of feudal

Japan), the archipelago comprised of so many different languages that traveling from one domain to the other often required translators. The issue of the mutual unintelligibility of regional languages started to be perceived by language planners as a problem to be solved. The modernization of Japan, which took inspiration from the institutions and policies of Western countries, needed to include a form of common communication as well. Consequently, a highly codified and standardized form of language known as 'National Language' (*kokugo*) came to be (Okamoto & Shibamoto-Smith). During the nineteenth and early-twentieth century, the 'movement for the unification of written and spoken language' (*gen bun itchi undō*) was successful in replacing older and different forms of language with the vernacular variety. Having used the varieties from the Tōkyō area as the basis upon which envision the newly created national language, the city acquired the role of an ideological linguistic centre. This further established its central role which becomes even clearer today when juxtaposed with other peripheral areas showing the symptoms of this asymmetric relationship. As a result, gradually moving away from Honshū, and reaching the geographical limits of the country means to encounter languages and cultures that must measure themselves against the resulting dichotomy to find answers for their future (Fiorentini).

With the standard language being inspired by the Tōkyō variety, the notion of dialect emerged as a hierarchically inferior deviation within this newly imagined sociolinguistic system. Under these conditions speaking a dialect often led to trouble. For example, children at school in Okinawa caught in the act of speaking in ways other than the standard language were forced to wear a dialect tag (*hōgen fuda*) as a form of punishment (Kondo 1999). In this sense, hiding (or erasing) one's own sociolinguistic profile was not only encouraged, but materially enforced. With time, the linguistic choices made in the capital have been observed to filter through the rest of the country; scholar Yanagita Kunio describes these linguistic concentric circles with his centre versus periphery theory (*hōgen shūken ron*). Thus, it is safe to say that the capital Tōkyō has acquired the role of a Blommaertian sociolinguistic centre: it is the maker of norms and criteria of appropriateness that people tend to orient to when producing meaning. Thus, it is safe to say that the capital Tōkyō

has acquired the role of a Blommaertian sociolinguistic centre; the maker of norms and criteria of appropriateness that people tend to orient to when producing meaning. This corresponds to the 'Higher scale' of Fig. 1, for it is characterized by a widespread and translocal reach, as opposed to limited to local contexts.

The resulting centre/periphery dichotomy is not only linguistic but geographical as well. The dialects of Japan have been divided into specific categories, each reflecting a position within Japanese language ecology. They are primarily divided into Eastern (including Tōkyō) and Western (including Kyōto) in addition to the Kyūshū, Hachijō groups and the Ryukyuan languages belonging to the Southern archipelago of Okinawa. This classification returns a vivid image of Japanese language ideology as it is projected by the centre. The projection physically extends to many of the islands that comprise the Japanese archipelago as a whole. The government has described many liminal territories as underdeveloped, devising strategies to reverse a decline that dates back to the prewar decades. The decline was not only linked to the lack of physical infrastructures, but was also a matter of societal development as well (Kuwahara).

Regardless, ongoing issues remain. The current state of the Ainu language in the northernmost island of Hokkaidō and that of the languages from the southernmost archipelago of Okinawa show how liminal territories are often characterized by language endangerment (Heinrich 2012). At the same time, contemporary language revitalization efforts in those areas are a sign that despite dialects faced severe suppression in the heyday of language standardization, since the postwar years there has been an increased attention towards the preservation of dialects (Shimoda). Discourse around the nostalgic hometown (*furusato*) and the subsequent appreciation of local forms of expression remind us that language is not bound to a fixed entity, but it is also a local practice linked to social and material cultural elements (Pennycook 2010). However, the tendency to consider dialects as a way to express locality also implies a polycentric view. On the one hand, dialects orient towards their own local contexts (the prefecture, the city, the village). On the other hand, their perceived idiosyncrasy reminds that the centre (the

standardized language) is also accounted for. This is especially notable in Japanese media, where dialects, registers and styles are often assigned to characters expected to embody certain roles. For example, the Japanese translation of the popular novel *Gone with the Wind* (1936) assigned the Tōhoku dialect (*Tōhoku ben*) to slaves and side characters, contributing to its idea of marginalization (Hiramoto 2009, 2010).

The linguistic repertoire comprising one's own sociolinguistic profile changes in value and perception depending on the centre of attention one is orienting to and the scale that it traverses at a given moment. We saw in the examples cited above how dialects that function locally suddenly change the way they negotiate the speaker's identity when becoming mobile. When juxtaposed to real or imagined centres they are marginalized and perceived as hierarchically inferior as opposed to the widespread standardized language. The higher scale context they are inserted into marks them as deviations, ultimately assigning different indexical trajectories to them akin to stereotyping. The distance between the centre and the periphery where the dialect is spoken becomes increasingly ideological as well. Meanwhile, the distance between what is considered standard and what is not is expressed in many different ways. As Blommaert (2010) remarks, since the majority of communication is polycentric by nature, one is free to break the rules at any moment. Forms of 'playful' polycentricity can be identified regardless of the physical space the linguistic resource is being deployed in. Numerous institutions at the prefectural level have consciously made the ideological distance between themselves and the centre a tool to negotiate their identities. It is not rare to encounter local dialects in touristic contexts and local linguistic landscapes (Long & Nakai). Sometimes, local grammar points and words are even turned into manga characters in a way similar to mascots, appearing on merchandise and collectibles. In this case, the physical, cultural and linguistic distance between prefectures and the centre is turned into a marketable commodity. Consciously silencing standardized language also unlocks new possibilities. It has been observed that young people sometimes take part in what has been described as language cosplay (dress-up/disguise) speaking in a specific dialect instead of the standardized language for the perceived properties associated to it and as an act of linguistic

transgression (Heinrich 2018).

Despite the widespread diffusion of standardized speech in contemporary Japan, peripheries are still putting efforts into preserving and using dialects as a means to promote local identities. This is especially true for Japan's bordering regions. Regardless, the Ainu of Hokkaidō to the North and the Ryukyuan languages in the South are among the groups whose languages have been threatened by extinction despite being a critical part of their local culture and history. In addition to local issues, Japan has been struggling with a nationwide demographic crisis for more than a decade as well. The consequences are that not only its population is ageing, but the population decline is also decreasing the number of speakers of those varieties that occupy a precarious position within this system. The trend, shared by other developed nations as well, has been well documented by scholars (Coulmas *et al.*; Matanle & Sato; Matanle) and is said to impact many aspects of society, especially in rural areas. Once again the duality between centre and periphery emerges. The role that global cities like Tōkyō have acquired as modern, young and vibrant cities marks a sharp contrast to declining surrounding regions.

In a way similar to Western capitals, Tōkyō has also increased its linguistic and cultural 'super-diversity', a term used by Vertovec when describing the dynamic and varied transnational migrations characterizing contemporary major cities (1025). In this context mobility other than being oriented towards the centres can become an actual necessity for the survival of many, including those in stages of transition, for example young people. As a result, language too becomes inserted into patterns of mobility.

Education and mobility

Many young students in Japan decide to invest in cram schools (*juku*) to acquire the tools needed to achieve their aspirations which usually include increasing the odds of being accepted to a high ranked institution. This, in turn, can lead to better prospects in the job market. Previous studies have addressed the importance of the transition between education levels and working life in Japan (Chiavacci; Entrich;

Honda; Pilz & Alexander; Roberson). These studies comment on Japan's tendency to rely on forms of credentialism that culminate in the correlation between university rank and a graduate's search outcome on the job market. However, entrance to top-ranked universities in Japan tends to be competitive. Up until 2020, a national standardized test was held throughout the country in mid-January with the goal to give both private and public universities additional criteria of selection for the admission of candidates. Since the test was administered only once a year, many students had to resort to independent study for a year in the hope of being admitted the following year. The exam was part of the wider 'examination hell' (*juken jigoku*) – a term that describes the many exams that a student in Japan must take during transitions between levels of education. However, it should be noted that this phenomenon is part of a wider western-centric narrative on the myth of academic excellence in East Asia. As Hikaru and Rappleye remark, the examinations are critical for only a selected part of the population, usually identified as the upper middle class. They also note that Japan is taking action to alleviate the pressure on students through diversifying its pathways towards university.

Beyond stereotyping, mobility does play a role in the life of students. Upon graduating high-school it is not uncommon to move to another prefecture sometimes far from home to attend university. After graduating university mobility once again becomes necessary. During the job hunting seasons companies usually hold information sessions that students must attend when applying for a job and this requires extensive nationwide traveling. We see how critical mobility becomes in this context and the role that a city like Tōkyō acquires. As described earlier, the city, and to an extent other centres that offer opportunities otherwise unavailable elsewhere, are also the makers of complexes of norms and perceived appropriateness criteria that people tend to orient to (Bakhtin). These are continuously produced and reproduced by phenomena like the one discussed above. This influence is projected into hierarchically organized norms, forms and expectations that become part of an ideal repertoire. This results in the need to orient toward these real or imagined centres when discerning between what is standard and what is deviant. As we will see with an example below, linguistic, cultural,

social, and even potentially aesthetic deviations are detrimental within this system. Thus, moving across physical and social space means to be subjected to processes of normativity and be evaluated on the basis of what the centre one points to indexes as appropriate. Given the hierarchal structure that characterizes this system, it is clear how the highest levels (those associate with centres) are the more power-invested. Erasing deviations, through mastering the patterns of normativity established at a given level, implies the possibility to move up, or 'jump', from lower levels. Those who achieve mastery of standard repertoires usually become mobile actors across these social and physical spaces. However, as this mobility is made possible by processes of erasure, sociolinguistic invisibility is ultimately made a prerequisite.

Patterns of mobility and erasure within a Japanese story

In this section, I present a story that, I argue, narrates dynamics typical of the centre and periphery dichotomy and of the journey towards a higher scale within this sociolinguistic system. I will start by providing background information on the story, then move to an analysis of the semiotics behind the phenomena influencing the characters. Lastly, I will focus on acts of physical and social mobility. Since the analysis will borrow from a film offering scenes of highly semiotic value, the mutual reinforcement of images and textual resources within this multimodal medium will be considered (Kress & Van Leeuwen).

The story is from a novel written in 2013 by Nobutaka Tsubota which is based on real events. The literal translation of the title is rather self-explanatory, "The story of the high-school gal who managed to raise her deviation score by 40 points and pass the entrance examination for Keiō in one year" (*Gakunen biri no gyaru ga ichinen de hensachi wo yonj*ū *agete kei*ō *daigaku ni genekig*ō*kaku shita hanashi*). The story was made into a film in 2015 under the shorter title *Birigyaru*, and has been generally well received, ranking among Japan's highest-grossing films of that year. The plot revolves around Sayaka, an underperforming student who is threatened with expulsion from her private high-school following an incident caused by her group of like-minded friends. She manages to avoid expulsion but loses the privilege of being admitted to a university

based on recommendation. Despite her poor academic abilities, Sayaka starts attending a cram school (*juku*) and finds resolve in the support of her mother and a skilled teacher. Eventually, she begins to change and eventually manages to pass the entrance examination for Keiō University.

The story fits within the coming of age genre but, as the title suggests, is also culturally-situated within the context of Japan. We can immediately see how interpretation of the story's title varies depending on the centre one orients to. In fact, the international audience would struggle to see what the point of being admitted to Keiō is. Although it is implied throughout the story that Keiō is a prestigious University in Tōkyō, to a Japanese viewer who knows perfectly what Keiō is (or someone familiar with Japanese higher education) the name alone is normally enough to evoke the sense of challenge that entails trying to be admitted there. When the novel was made into a film and distributed internationally, the name *Flying Colors* was chosen. The title shifts to a more marketable length and English-friendly format. It also shifts the focus by implying the completion of a task (in this case a nod to the national university entrance examinations) as often indicated by the proverbial English idiom 'with flying colo[u]rs'. The concept of overcoming academic obstacles has also a rather wide appeal even beyond Japanese borders. However, the Japanese title *Birigyaru* (a nickname connoting a misbehaved girl) goes further towards highlighting the inappropriate behaviour of the protagonist. In fact, she may be considered a *gyaru*: part of a female subculture characterized by a unique aesthetic and 'rebellious' attitude, expressed through speech patterns that are said to diverge notably from what is perceived as the norm among girls of their age and indeed female language in general (Gagné).

Through the story it is possible to highlight agents of change that ultimately led to mobility and sociolinguistic erasure. Firstly, in Sayaka's quest centres and peripheries emerge as the polarized semiotic spaces that the main character navigates. We can see how the protagonist's disregard for her high school norms and her being a *gyaru* make her an outcast in respect to this centre of authority. Her teacher calling her

human garbage (*ningen no kuzu*) is an example. She is badly perceived not just for her lack of scholarly knowledge, but especially for her behaviour as a carefree *gyaru*, an attitude incompatible with the institution. She is actually orienting towards those set of criteria that entail being a *gyaru* rather than those befitting a student of an upper middle class private high-school. As a consequence, due to the fact that she is still a high school student, she is inevitably put at the periphery of this centre she must confront on a daily basis.

Spaces also reflect this relationship. Sayaka is shown enjoying frequent visits to night clubs, karaoke venues as well as roaming the streets at night. However, far greater centres of authority soon emerge from the story that are both social and geographical in nature. When she is first asked by the cram school teacher to pick a university to prepare for, all the names that he suggests are well-known institutions from either Tōkyō or Kyōto. Sayaka jokingly picks the one that she thinks is the most prestigious, Keiō in Tōkyō. She is surprised when the teacher actually follows along and starts preparing her a study plan. This is when her centre of reference subtly begins to change. Simultaneously, new appropriateness criteria and norms are projected by this new centre of power – which occupies a higher place in our imagined hierarchy of layers, discussed above – and so inequality is made manifest.

It is only when orienting towards this centre that Sayaka's poor academic abilities are truly made evident and assigned a rank. Her writing and speech are perceived as funny at best; she even struggles pronouncing and writing the name of the university she wishes to attend correctly. She displays the attitudes and the mannerisms typical of her *gyaru* background. It is made clear that in order to be admitted and move to Tōkyō, she needs to change by adhering to the strict prerequisites imposed by the new centre she is orienting to. She is confronted with different centres; the first is her school, but then the focus gradually shifts to Tōkyō's Keiō University and thus what was the centre becomes the new periphery. When she begins shifting her orientation from her usual space to more 'normative' stratified vertical layers, she is inevitably subjected to different forms of indexicality that value resources differently, thus, highlighting her current incompatibility.

Blommaert (2010) refers to this as 'orders of indexicality'. Under this framework, being a *gyaru* and achieving Keiō admission are perceived as paradoxical by her peers and high school teacher. While it would be easy to consider just her low scores and poor academic performances as the sole markers of failure, there are further factors involved. Embracing admission to Keiō as her goal, implies a change of habits in a way that is unknown to her. Sayaka is reminded multiple times that it is all in her best interest to learn to adapt as she would gain many benefits from being admitted there. In other words, she needs to get rid of her deviant traits to increase her chances of success. She is encouraged to start watching the news, acquires new words and she gradually changes her routine until she quits her *gyaru* lifestyle completely. Her world view changes as she continues her quest to develop these skills, including the repertoires that will make her fit for Keiō. She is reminded multiple times that it is in her best interest to learn to adapt as she would gain many benefits from being admitted to Keiō. Ultimately, what was perceived as appropriate to and coherent with the centre she previously oriented to becomes inadequate to this new configuration of events.

Some of the most apparent transformations are both linguistic and aesthetic. At first she dyes her hair back to its. At first she dyes her hair back to her natural colour, but then, as her resolve increases, gets a shorter cut and starts wearing simple tracksuits. She drops the mannerism that characterized her *gyaru* persona, showing increased proficiency in the national language (*kokugo*) as well as increasing the number of characters (*kanji*) associated with the history, geography and culture of Japan that she can now read as it would be expected from her. She also acquires English writing and reading skills with the aid of her new dictionary. By the time she concludes her training at the cram school, all the linguistic and aesthetic traits that have caused her to be perceived as deviant have disappeared. She now proves to be able to deploy linguistic and social repertoires that are perceived as appropriate.

This change in repertoires and its subsequent change in the way others come to perceive her are a product of Sayaka's quest to be admitted to Keiō. The ability that this institution has to enact its principles and index the student's repertoires is compatible with what

Blommaert (2010) described as a higher scale. The higher level of this imagined stratified hierarchy layered system is occupied by Keiō, the centre the protagonist orients to. The characteristics of a higher scale are all present. The university is presented as having a rich history as well as an established presence, with the name alone functioning as a synonym for timeless prestige. At first, Sayaka is deemed unworthy by everyone to be admitted there, but is then redeemed when she aligns with the criteria set by the powerful institution, suggesting that its influence is widespread, widely accepted and nationwide. The entrance examination is a tangible example of how these criteria are physically enacted. Students from different areas gather in selected places to have their repertoires tested in the same way, becoming protagonists of acts of deterritorialization. Sayaka starts at the bottom of this hierarchy of scales, having in the past indulged in momentary activities in local and narrowly-situated settings. As time passes, she tries to move from her lower sociolinguistic level to the higher scale, with the result that the norms and criteria of the higher level start to prevail over the lower ones. This kickstarts the linguistic and aesthetic changes discussed earlier.

By making use of its multimodality the film emphasizes mobility in a variety of ways. It starts and ends with scenes shot around the same subject: a bullet train (*shinkansen*). Here, it represents a symbol of both geographical and social mobility. At first, we see the protagonist as a child watching the train passing by. The train passes over a bridge by a river bank, intercepting a local bike lane that the protagonist uses for her daily commute. Throughout the film, the protagonist visits the place and stops to gaze at the passing train several times, either alone or with different supporting characters. It is here that her mother has the idea to send her to a private school.

Here, she also shares her thoughts with a fellow student from the cram school. By the end of the film, she is last seen on board of the very same train she had seen so many times from afar, wearing formal clothes and headed to Tōkyō. Away from the tracks the cram school teacher waves goodbye as he witnesses the beginning of her physical journey towards the capital.

The centres the protagonist orients to are also very physical. Initially,

her high school and home juxtapose the arcades, karaoke venues and the streets she used to roam during her *gyaru* nights. As she quits her *gyaru* lifestyle to focus on her studies, she starts spending the majority of her time either at home or at the cram school. The high school, both as a place and as an institution is de-emphasized because the protagonist now is orienting towards criteria set by another institution which is higher on the hierarchy, Keiō. For this reason, she would rather spend her days at the cram school preparing for that specific entrance examination rather than at her regular school. Both her mother, the first who decided to send her there, and her teachers are well aware of this dynamic.

The idea here is that acquiring the repertoire associated with a specific higher centre is essentially a preparation for a physical departure (accompanied by its social implications) that will eventually occur. At first, geographical mobility is needed when the entrance examinations are held. Students gather in sizable numbers to take the test at the same location and have their specifically acquired repertoires tested. They thus become protagonists of acts of deterritorialization. This movement is not only physical, but also cultural and social. As they physically move closer to the centre they have been studying hard to adapt to, their chances of becoming social actors permanently associated with it increase.

At last, the protagonist finally manages to be accepted to Keiō. This proves once and for all that her previous, 'inadequate' repertoires have been erased and brought to a 'national standard'. This erasure comes with the reward of the opportunity to leave for Tōkyō. Conversely, those who have failed to completely adapt themselves, for example one of her friends from the cram school, are left behind, failing to move both socially and geographically.

Mobility beyond borders

The story commented above portrayed acts of mobility occurring within national boundaries. However, Japan is also home to people whose sociolinguistic profiles have roots behind its borders. Discourse on ethnic homogeneity has had a prominent role in shaping popular perceptions towards migration at the cost of downplaying the country's actual

diversity (Doak). Regardless, there are now several communities and individuals from many different countries contributing to Japan's cultural and linguistic diversity. The variety of transnational profiles is reflected in the numerous terms associated with one's own heritage in relation to residence. On the one hand, the word *nikkeijin* (person of Japanese descent) is the Japanese term used to describe a migrant or a person with Japanese ancestry who is often not a citizen of Japan and may live or have lived abroad. On the other hand, people living in Japan born from one Japanese parent and one non-Japanese parent are often referred to as *hāfu* (from the English half).

Regardless of ideology, the combination of the country's low fertility rate and its diversified immigration is leading to an unprecedented number of varied sociolinguistic profiles being present in Japan. There are many communities in the country characterized by transnational forms of heritage. Language is said to be a central aspect for the identity of these individuals whose engagements with language ideologies vary widely (Takamori). Although potentially having access to multiple languages, it is in the combination of performance within a specific physical space that their liminality emerges. In her study, Takamori highlights how the people of Japanese descent (with one Japanese or American parent) she interviewed occupied contradictory spaces in regard to their ability (or lack thereof) to deploy the linguistic and cultural repertoires that they were expected to master. For example, there were those who failed to perform their Japaneseness adequately but felt at ease with their North American heritage. For them, Japanese as a heritage language does not necessarily mean inclusion, but rather a potential source of nervousness and embarrassment. If observed through the lens of sociolinguistic of globalization, cases like these show how mobility has the potential to impact on the perception associated to a certain sociolinguistic profile. Being polycentric, they are subjected to multiple criteria of appropriateness, but it is when inserted into patterns of mobility, getting closer to a specific centre, that certain criteria tend to prevail on others. Kondo (1990), observed how although Japanese Americans may look Japanese and have Japanese surnames, they may act more American than Japanese, leading to an idiosyncratic reaction by a Japanese observer. In this case, mobility changed the value of

Japanese as a linguistic resource. Possessing a certain degree of fluency in an East Asian language such as Japanese could be seen as a resource back in North America, but the same could not be said if not appropriately deployed in Japan according to local criteria of appropriateness. Furthermore, phenotypical characteristics that do not match mainstream notions of Japaneseness may contribute to index to the otherness of the individual. The ultimate result is that the individual is considered as an outsider subjected to local orders of indexicality, rather than as an actual local peer. Osanami-Törngren has addressed the issue, and after interviewing several individuals in Japan coming from mixed backgrounds, hypothesized that multiple ethnic options are available to them. This has several implications. Given the inability to move past local orders of indexicality and having their Japanese identity not fully recognized, the option to pass as foreigners or embracing a *hāfu* identity proved to be effective strategies. Through real or simulated acts of deterritorialization, a person can pass as a seemingly mobile actor (a foreigner from abroad, a heritage speaker *hāfu*, etc.) rather than a strictly local one. This erasure grants the ability to be subjected to more advantageous criteria of appropriateness. Real or simulated mobility once again changes the value and ownership of linguistic resources with intentional erasure being the key to unlock new advantages related to one's own sociolinguistic profile. However, the double-edged nature of these acts has been commented upon by Suzuki and Miller (1986, 1995), who call it a form of speech commodification. Given the folk beliefs that the Japanese can speak Japanese perfectly, whenever a foreigner (or a person assumed to be) demonstrates fluency to any degree it becomes a source of amazement (Fukuda). Mistakes and imprecisions are said to be non-threatening as they both confirm and reinforce this ideology rooted in forms of nationalism that find in media an ideal outlet.

Processes of erasure can be based on personal initiative. More or less consciously, one person can opt to silence certain traits and prioritize others out of personal preference or necessity. However, history tells us that sometimes these processes can also be imposed, leading to the widespread and systematic stigmatization of certain ethnic and linguistic profiles. These perceptions may then change once again with the passage of time and the alteration of historical circumstances. The *nikkei*

community of Hawai'i is an example of this. People started emigrating from the Nipponic archipelago to Hawai'i in 1800 to seek new employment opportunities in the islands' agricultural sector. Since migrants were from different prefectures, Hawai'i quickly became a point of contact for many different languages. These were not only regional varieties from Japan, but also languages from other countries of East Asia. In this context, a process of language mixing is said to have occurred, inevitably silencing certain components while keeping others (Asahi & Long; Shimada & Honda). Despite the difficulty of that harsh life, many workers eventually decided to stay, forming families and communities in the process. The early generations made the preservation of their cultural identities a priority. They maintained schools and places of worship, keeping in touch with their heritage. However, when WWII came to Hawai'i, so did a form of anti-Japanese sentiment. Despite being members of the Hawaiian society, many *nikkei* were locked behind bars for their heritage alone. In other words, speaking Japanese could have meant imprisonment during those times. At the end of the war, this forceful process of erasure eventually came to an end. Today, Hawai'i' is home to one of the most influential Japanese communities in the world. The community is putting effort into the preservation of its heritage, including its language. As a result, the number of Japanese speakers in Hawai'i' is one of the highest of the nation. The ideological perception of one's own sociolinguistic profile in Hawai'i' has been tied to the ever shifting waves of history, facilitating or threatening it depending on the historical circumstances.

Another category of mobile actors who have their repertoire and identity tested is that of the *hikiagesha* (returnees). The term indicates people of Japanese descent who were either born in or lived abroad for extended lengths of time before deciding to head to their homeland. While the *hikiagesha* come from several countries of origin, communities from Brazil and Korea are said to be the most numerous, as well as being those who receive the most attention from the media (Tsuda 2003). Some of these individuals move to Japan temporarily to work and save money to bring back home, becoming *dekasegi* (working migrants), while others eventually settle in Japan, establishing transnational households in the process. However, the more culturally-distant second or third

generations (*nisei*, *sansei*) tend to be the ones who move to Japan, which leads to a series of challenges. We discussed earlier how mobility can renegotiate a person's profile depending on context. Local orders of indexicality are shaped by the semiotic forces emanating from real or perceived centres. Despite foreigners in Japan are more common than in the past, for many people the only way to meet a person of Japanese descent who came from Brazil remains the television or magazines. Stereotypes and images associated to the Brazilian *nikkei* are produced and reproduced through media. Tsuda (2003) commented on the critical role that Japanese media has in shaping the discourse around this group in particular. Tsuda has observed that there is some degree of variation in the portrayal of individuals associated with this heritage depending on the channel (public broadcast or commercial corporation). However, essentialism and generalization remain the main tendencies, ensuring mass appeal of the shows. This results in the reinforcement of prevailing ethnic perceptions towards this demographic segment. This is evident by the downplaying of their foreignness in order to make them more appealing to the Japanese audience who in turn retain the expectation that they managed to preserve Japanese culture thanks to their Japanese ancestry. We can therefore see how media acquires the role of a powerful semiotic central force capable of shaping public perceptions towards categories of individuals that many may never even meet once in their lifetimes. The expectations set in this way serve as criteria of appropriateness which are evaluative in nature. They are widespread and central since they emanate from the respected centre of authority that is public television in Japan (Pharr). Thus, a set of sociolinguistic traits are associated to an individual before he/she even speaks. The repertoire that is eventually deployed is juxtaposed with the concrete combination of linguistic resources available to the individual which may not meet the expectations. Consequently, certain traits are erased in advance. The process of erasure here is potentially double-fold. On one hand is the erasure on the Japanese side of those traits associated with foreignness. On the other hand, Tsuda (2000) reported instances where Japanese-Brazilians return migrants in Japan preferred to intentionally silence their Japaneseness emphasizing their Brazilian national identity instead. However, the emphasis on foreign traits instead of Japanese

ones is said to not always be successful because as Tsuda (1998) notes, prejudice and discrimination towards this minority happens on the basis of not only language but also on the basis of looks and behavior. In a sense, this process is similar to the one observed by Kingsberg who described the process of inclusion of Japanese in Brazil as characterized by the gain of some features and the loss of others to gain inclusion. What has been observed in Japan is a form of resistance based on erasure enacted against disadvantageous criteria of evaluation. In other words, certain traits are silenced with the result that one's own profile is situated in relation to a different centre of attention. The repertoire available to the speaker is valued differently, based upon one's own aspirations.

Conclusion

Mobility has the often disturbing ability to dislocate cultural and linguistic resources across wide geographical and social distances. Education, work and migration in general represent patterns of mobility which individuals or groups are inserted into. When moving, the linguistic and cultural resources of these peoples change in value, becoming subjected to local criteria of normativity and appropriateness emanating from real or perceived centres of attention. Changing one's own orientation towards one centre rather than the other implies the erasure of certain traits and the acquisition of others. The historical centrality of the capital and its institutions as well as the ongoing demographic crisis which is leaving rural areas increasingly empty are contributing to deepen the divide between centre and periphery in contemporary Japan. In this context, mobility becomes a necessity along with the traits that enable it. Entering the mainstream means to be able to reproduce the skills established by the higher sociolinguistic scale. Major city centres and their institutions are increasing their influence within and beyond national borders, becoming influential normative points of reference in the process. Acts of erasure to achieve the traits perceived as most suitable as well as their associated acts of deterritorialization are the result of the orientation towards real or imagined centres. These may be intentional, as in the case of the student who underwent major personal transformations in order to be admitted

to a prestigious university in the capital, or the Japanese Brazilians prioritizing the traits indexing their foreignness whilst in Japan. Processes of erasure can be imposed as in the case of the Japanese Americans during WWII. They can also be unintentional as in the case of the *nikkei* returnees whose linguistic and cultural resources turned out be detrimental in the new setting.

If we consider the culturally-situated context of Japan, these processes of erasure lead to forms of inequality, ultimately playing a role in the perception of sociolinguistic invisibility as a cause *and* effect of human mobility. Thus, renegotiating one's own profile, for example by erasing traits not associated with the most widely accepted local criteria of appropriateness, becomes a widely pursued endeavour which ultimately culminates in acceptance or rejection by the corresponding group. With global cities like Tōkyō increasing their linguistic and cultural diversity at a fast pace, contemporary language ideology is tested on a truly global stage. Therefore, it is desirable for future research to take on new sociolinguistic challenges that could help us understand the relationship between mobile resources and their ability to renegotiate asymmetric power relations. Potential areas of analysis include the categorizations of what is commonly perceived as centre and periphery as well as local and translocal ethnic profiles, ideologically as real or imagined as they may be.

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