

## **Identities in Languages**

**Yuriko Ojima**

**Kinjo Gakuin Junior High School**

“I would add English as an official language of Japan.” That was my answer in regards to a question asked by my teacher, “What would you do if you became Prime Minister of Japan?” The first reason is that if we are able to speak English, we can communicate with foreigners with ease, and it will be useful for our businesses and education. Secondly, most of the latest information on the Internet is in English. If we are able to access and understand new information written in English, we can keep up with the other countries in the world.

However something changed my mind. Last summer, I went to America to study abroad, and during my time there I met a girl from Russia. One day, she asked me, “Do you want to speak English like American people?” “Yes,” I replied very quickly without any hesitation. In my head, I was thinking to myself, “The English textbooks I am using at school are all written in American English,” and “American English sounds so much cooler than Japanese English.” However, the Russian girl’s reply to me was, “I don’t think I want to talk like Americans. I am Russian, even when I am speaking English. I want to keep my accent so that I can keep my identity as a Russian.” To be honest, at first I couldn’t understand her feelings on the matter. However, when I thought more about it, I realized that our accent is a part of our identities, and our mother tongue and identity are deeply intertwined. When I thought about the idea of making English one of the official languages in Japan again, a new idea came to my mind.

In Japan, we’ve been treasuring our language as a big part of our culture over many years. As for personalities, I believe that Japanese people can read the situation very well, and they are good at working as a team. This is probably why the term “KY” was created. In a positive way, we can say that Japanese people are in harmony with everyone around them, but in a negative aspect, we lack uniqueness as individuals. Comparing the personalities of Japanese people and those of native speakers of English, I’ve come to realize that we are very different from each other. Then, I started wondering whether we would lose our culture and personalities if English became one of our official languages.

Do you know the linguist, Braj Kachuru? He claimed that English is not only “one” English. Rather he suggested the term, “World Englishes.” By applying this theory, Chinglish, English with a Chinese accent, and Singlish, English with a Singaporean accent have started gaining recognition around the world. We become aware of this more when we communicate with foreigners. The accuracy and the pronunciation of native English is far less important than how you express yourself and convey messages towards other people.

Now in Japan, many companies are switching to English as the official corporate language, which has both pros and cons. For example it has the problem of communication between coworkers. “Do you agree with the idea of adding English to the official language in Japan?” If someone asked me this question a few months ago, I would have said, “Yes.” But to tell you the truth, I don’t know the answer honestly. But, it’s up to our generation to decide how we face the continuation of English education, and how we use English in our society.

“What would you do, if you became Prime Minister of Japan?” “I want to make a country where we can learn how to express ourselves as Japanese, and to share our identities, and promote communication in our society.” That’s my new answer.

*(3rd Prize of the 66th Contest, 2014)*

