A Story of Ideological Becoming: Navigating Self Amidst Competing Ideals

Nona Moskowitz, PhD (Wittenberg University)
nmoskowitz@wittenberg.edu

What do you like about [school]?
…Talking with friends, we think about things together. ...
What do you not like about school?
That there are teachers. (laughs)
Really? You don't like the teachers?
Yes. In other words, I hate them. (giggles)

Emiko's comment surprises me. A good student overall, she appeared to adhere to the main values of the school (Eckert 1990). I press her to expand.

We think differently.
For example?
It's like, when teachers want us to do something quickly, I think that it would be best to do it slowly… It's the complete opposite. We don't match.
So, you're saying that what you think is important and what teachers think is important are different?
Exactly.

Through discourse analysis, this article explores the way in which Emiko, at the junction of imagining a future self, connects with national ideologies at odds with local ways. In defining the problem as an issue of perspectives, Emiko highlights the friction between two cultural systems with competing sets of practices and ideologies for self and community. Oppositions between local/Island and mainland/national ideals characterize daily life at Ogasawara Middle, the only Middle School on Chichijima Island, Japan.[1] To some extent, the school defines what it means to be Japanese and supplies one force in students' process of "ideological becoming" (Bakhtin 1981). Perceiving the need to index this "Japaneseness" through linguistic markers, such as honorifics and gendered self-referent terms, Emiko critiques the teachers for not mandating mainland practices at school. The teachers, themselves mainland transplants, enter a locale with different practices which they variously adopt or accommodate upon moving to Chichijima (Moskowitz 2015). Yet, while "being Japanese" is a measure Emiko invokes, she also recognizes proper language use as a level of maturity that she should be able to assume as a middle schooler.

Six-hundred miles from mainland Japan, Chichijima occupies a peripheral location within the nation, spatially and culturally. Originally a British colony annexed by Japan in 1876 and later administered by the American Navy (1945-1968), some distinct cultural forms characterize school and Island life. These include prioritizing family over work, a more informal

interactional style expressed through casual dress (no school uniforms) and fewer honorifics, and the practice of *yobisute* (dropping the honorific title Mr./Ms. from names) in address. Following local norms, teachers address students by first name with no honorific title, unlike mainland standard address patterns of last name + honorific title (Moskowitz 2015). From a mainland perspective, local address practices erase some of the institutionalized hierarchies or formality more common on the mainland, including those characterizing teacher-student relationships. As such, they resist the centripetal forces of "unitary language," which tend toward "ideological unification and centralization" (Bakhtin 1981, 271).

As I will discuss, Emiko's dislike of the teachers does not equal a disparaging of mainland norms and practices. She reproduces mainland ideologies for gender and honorific language and critiques herself for not adhering to some of those expectations. A ninth grader about to leave home to attend a mainland high school, she is actively navigating competing ideologies for self and other as she begins to imagine herself as a mainlander. Entering mainland society entails speaking like a mainlander, perhaps because *kotobazukai* ('language use') was a recurrent theme at school.

Teachers often talk about kotobazukai.
Yes, but, well, now people speak poorly.
...Is it a problem?
We use language so poorly, so... as a Japanese person, we may be told we're strange.

Here, Emiko affirms the teachers' belief that students' language use needs to be corrected. She can imagine that she will be thought of as strange if, "as a Japanese person," she cannot speak properly. She criticizes her own language use. "I can't use honorifics, not really. That's not good." "Becoming adult," Emiko explains, entails becoming aware of hierarchical differences asserted through honorific and polite language use. She upholds the ideal, national narrative found elsewhere which Ogasawara Middle School teachers likewise articulated (Befu 2010; Gottlieb 2011; Kondo 1992; Okamoto 2004). Japanese schools teach hierarchy in the form of nonreciprocal relations (student-teacher, older-younger student), which are (re)produced through language and other behaviors (Rosenberger 1992; Wang 2020).

And similar to recognizing the necessity of adopting nonreciprocal patterns of address, she likewise imposes on herself the need to adopt a particular gendered sense of self which felt "too grown up" (see Moskowitz 2014). Japanese is known for its range of self-referent terms (e.g., *(w)atakushi*, *(w)atashi*, *uchi*, *boku*, *ore*), which index a variety of social meanings such as gender, age, regional affiliation, politeness, etc. (see e.g., Abe 2004; Ide 1991; Kondo 1990; Martin 1975). While society asserts ideologies about "appropriate" contexts and speakers for particular terms, and pressure to adhere to these norms may be strong, individuals play with self-referent meanings and their boundaries (Inoue 2006; Miyazaki 2004; SturtzSreethahan 2006). Thus, while *(w)atashi* may be the expected, standard term for

middle school girls, Ogasawara females use a range of terms for self-reference (see also Miyazaki 2002, 2004). As I explain elsewhere (Moskowitz 2014), Emiko is uncomfortable by

the gendered connotations for self that she perceives *watashi* to assert and uses *uchi* for self-reference instead. *Uchi* has the connotation of being less feminine and more casual than *watashi* (Yee and Wong 2021). Nevertheless, Emiko imagines she will need to use *watashi* on the mainland. For Emiko, this reimagining of self extends beyond adopting honorific speech patterns and includes changing the term she uses for "I."

Yet, Emiko will also claim that the hierarchy asserted through nonreciprocal forms is not needed between younger and older students. In mainland schools, older students drop the honorific title (Mr./Ms.) in addressing younger students (*yobisute*) and expect the honorific title be given in return, creating a sense of hierarchy through nonreciprocal address forms. I did not perceive that Emiko recognized the contradiction between wanting to maintain nonreciprocal relations with teachers at school and telling junior students that they do not need to use polite forms to address the older students.

Emiko is caught between two systems, mainland and Island, and her oscillating perspective reflects not a dilemma but contradictory assertions about the place of honorific forms. While the school's "voice" assumes an authoritative quality by virtue of the power and respect it retains in Japanese society, Emiko, raised on the Island, has internalized a competing set of values as valid.

Yet, as Emiko contemplates the self she believes she will need to become on the mainland, she must acknowledge some teacher admonishments as true. This "ideological becoming," as Bakhtin (1981, 341) explains, "is the process of selectively assimilating the words of others."

> In everyday rounds of our consciousness, the internally persuasive word is half-ours and half-someone else's. Its creativity and productiveness consist precisely in the fact that such a word awakens new and independent words… it enters into interanimating relationships with new contexts. (Bakhtin 1981, 345-6)

Emiko's words reiterate the same message located in the teachers' own dialogue, but the context is new, and the phrasing is her own: it is half-hers and half-someone else's. She evaluates herself in terms of appropriate language and therefore critiques herself for not using honorifics properly. In doing so, she uses the teachers' critique to critique herself.

In short, Emiko's process of ideologically becoming a "mainlander" involves both adopting a new sense of hierarchy or distance between people as well as a new gendered self. In this process, Emiko perceives a disjuncture between herself, as enacted through current practices, and the self that she should be as a middle school student and certainly as a mainlander. Emiko does not seem to be overtly debating which system is "right"—she seems to accept, at least in theory, that the mainland system constitutes the "correct" set of practices. Her

struggle lies in a concern in how to integrate self and nation while reaffirming a desire to be local. If she does not speak properly—use honorifics properly and adopt *watashi* for self-

reference—she will be thought of as "strange" as a Japanese person. For Emiko, this means adopting an "I"—literally and metaphorically—that she may not be fully ready for but which she perceives the nation to require.

Notes

[1] An unmarried, white American female with no prior ties to the community, I conducted 15 months of fieldwork on Chichijima Island. My research examined the range of voices—teacher-student-curricular, among others—which locate Ogasawara Middle School as multi-discursive site. I attended the school from 8 a.m. - 6:00 p.m. daily and observed classroom activities from the back of the room. I spent one month in each the 7th, 8th, and 9th grade classes before focusing on the 8th grade class, which became the 9th grade class in April when the new Japanese schoolyear begins. In addition to observing all school activities, I conducted semi-structured interviews with teachers, students, and some parents and community members. Emiko's interview, conducted over the summer of her ninth-grade year, was selected for this analysis because its length (over 2 hours) offered the most insight based on her own telling of events. Emiko is a pseudonym. Precise dates are not given to assist with anonymity.

Acknowledgements

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Author Biography

Dr. Nona Moskowitz is Associate Professor in the Department of Sociology and East Asian Studies Program at Wittenberg University. Her research focuses on self, language, gender, and education in Japan. She has conducted fieldwork in Tokyo, in Yamaguchi Prefecture and on Chichijima Island. She also conducts research on cosplay practices in the U.S.

Author contact: Nona Moskowitz, PhD (Wittenberg University), nmoskowitz@wittenberg.edu