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Unbalanced proportion of language use between parents and children

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Children's multiple language use in the families temporary staying in Japan: Unbalanced proportion of language use between parents and children

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The purpose of this study is to investigate the dynamics of language use among 9 foreign families temporarily living in Japan. In individual interviews, 2 fathers and 7 mothers were asked about the estimated proportion of languages used in the home. Our results showed that in the 7 out of 9 families there was an imbalance in language use between children and their mothers which was not seen in communications between children and their fathers. Most children were required to acquire proficiencies in multiple languages, and this may cause stress to some extent; thus, future studies need to examine the potentially detrimental aspects of multiple language use within families.

Key words: language use, bilingualism, children, parents, stress

Introduction

Although there is extensive research into immigrants and students studying abroad, not as much attention has been paid to employees or researchers with families living temporarily overseas. However, these families are quite likely to confront unique problems not faced by the other groups. Because these families plan to return to their country in several years, children are required to adjust to both their original home and new host cultures. This fact would be of significant importance to parents who needed to rear young children in both cultural environments.

A host culture may be quite different from the parents' original culture in terms of language, customs and behaviour. It is likely that children raised in a host culture will encounter difficulties in adjusting to their new cultural environment when they return to their home country if they do not understand the differences between the two cultures. On the other hand, they may have trouble getting along with the local people who reside in their host country if they retain the customs of their parents' home country.

Although we investigated several cultural phenomena, this study will present data focusing exclusively on details of language use in the families temporarily staying in Japan. Berry, Poortinga, Segal and Dasen (1992) pointed out that language is one of the most crucial elements of culture and is necessary for joining the society. It is therefore critically important to examine how parents and their children use their local host and native languages differently in the home.

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This may provide insight into the ways in which other elements of culture are modified in families in these types of settings.

Method

Participants

Nine foreign families living in Japan (2 fathers and 7 mothers) from seven countries (Australia, Bolivia, China, Egypt, Indonesia, Korea, and Singapore) participated in the study. Table 1 shows family details.

Table 1 Basic backgrounds of 9 families

	Father's Nationality	Mother's Nationality	Children's Age	Children's Sex	Year Came to Japan	Year back to country
1	Indonesia	Indonesia	5	Male	2007-father&son 2006-mother	2008
2	Indonesia	Indonesia	7 5	Male female	2000~mother& children	2008
3	Indonesia	Indonesia	7 1	Male, Female	2005~	2008 or 2009
4	Egypt	Egypt	7 4	Male, Female	2004~	2010
5	China	China	15 9	Male, Male	1987~	undecided
6	Korea	Korea	13 9	Male, Male	1992~	undecided
7	Japan	Bolivia	11	Male	1985-mother	undecided
8	Japan	Singapore	13 7	Female, male	1991~	undecided
9	Australia	Japan	5 3 1	Male, male, Female	1990~1993 2002~	undecided

Procedures

Participants were asked to describe the proportion of time various languages were used by the following parties: children, parents, and Japanese and other friends. Seven parents participated in interviews, and two parents corresponded via e-mails between July and November, 2007.

Results

Parents were asked to estimate the proportion of language use in the home, and also given several questions related to language use and family background. All families except the Egyptian used more than one language at home. One of the most distinctive points shared among the seven out of nine families was the imbalance in language use between children and their mothers, a finding not seen in communications between children and their fathers. For instance, a child spoke Japanese to his mother 100% of the time, whereas the mother replied in Japanese 20% of the time and in Indonesian an additional 20% of the time (Case 2). Only one out of 13 children was spoken to mothers using languages in equal proportion (Case 7), compared with six of the 13 children spoken to fathers in this way ($p = .037$, Fisher's exact test, One-tailed).

Case 1 An Indonesian Family (A)

Family Background

The parents were Indonesian with a 5-year-old boy, who was enrolled in a local kindergarten school. All family members and the investigator (the first author) were present for the interview at the family home. Although both parents were able to speak Japanese, the mother's command of the language was superior (she was a Japanese teacher), and she answered most of the questions asked during the interview. Both parents had been in Japan in the past (the mother for 6 weeks during high school and for a year as an exchange student during university, and the father for three and one-half years for study); however, the mother arrived in Japan for this stay in October, 2006, while the father and the son arrived in February, 2007. The mother and the son planned to return to Indonesia in 2008, whereas it was possible the father could remain in Japan longer.

Language Use in the Family

Three languages were spoken in the family. The father's native language was Javanese, the mother spoke Javanese and Indonesian bilingually, and the child spoke Indonesian, Javanese and Japanese. Figure 1 shows the estimated proportion of language use in the home. Though the language use between father and son was balanced, there was an imbalance between mother and son.

Did the parents intentionally use different languages in their communication with their son?

No. They used languages at home without any specific intentions.

Did the parents have any particular concerns about their child's language development?

No. Because both parents were certain that mother and son would return to Indonesia in the near future, and that young children learn languages quickly, they did not worry much about the son's language development.

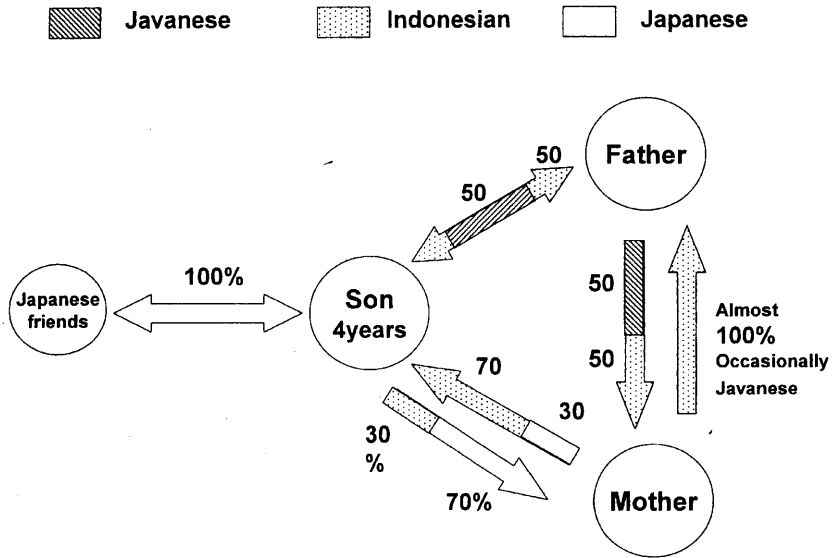


Figure 1. The language use in an Indonesian family (A).

Case 2 An Indonesian Family (B)

Family Background

The parents were Indonesian with a 7-year-old son (a local elementary school student) and a 5-year-old daughter (a local kindergarten pupil). The interview was conducted with the father in a room in Tohoku University; the language spoken was Japanese. The family came to Japan in 2000 and planned to return to Indonesia in April, 2008. Only the father had had experience living abroad (a year in Switzerland and 4 weeks in Germany for research purposes).

Language Use in the Family

Indonesian, Javanese and Japanese were spoken in the home. Figure 2 illustrates the estimated proportion of language use in the family. The balance of language use between the father and each child were equal, whereas that between the mother and children were not (mother → children: Japanese 80, Indonesian 20%; children → mother: Japanese almost 100%). Although the son could understand and pronounce Indonesian words, he could not create a proper sentence, so for the most part he responded in Japanese. The daughter, on the other hand, had a much poorer understanding of Indonesian. In addition, when the parents spoke in Javanese, the children did not understand what they were saying. The parents were also teaching the son to read Arabic.

Did the parents intentionally use different languages in their communication with their children?

No. Although the parents wanted their children to be able to speak Indonesian, the difficulty and time required to teach the language were significant, so they decided to teach their children intensively for a few months before they left Japan.

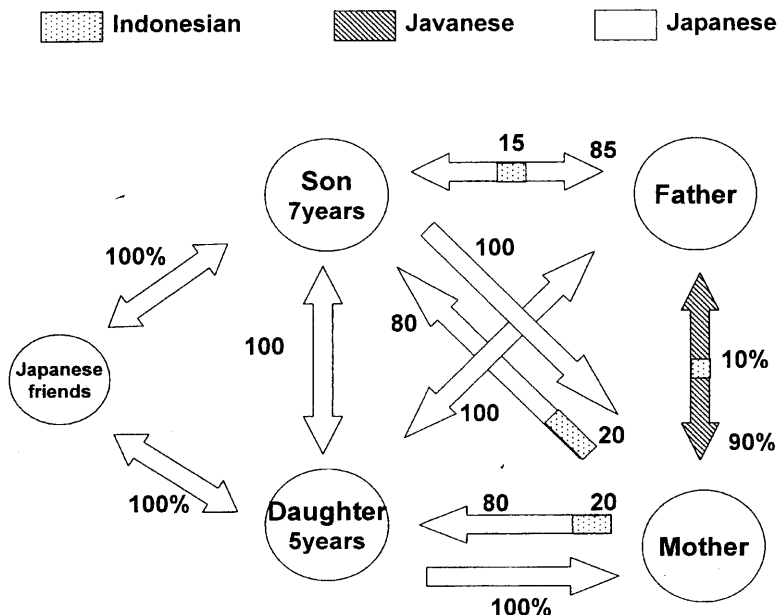


Figure 2. The language use in an Indonesian family (B).

Did the parents have any particular concerns about their children's language development?

Yes. Although the father was fluent in Japanese, the mother spoke the language very infrequently; as a result, she sometimes had trouble communicating to the children because their dominant language had by now become Japanese. However, because the family would soon go back to Indonesia, the parents thought the situation would be fine.

Case 3 An Indonesian family (C)

Family Background

Both parents were Indonesian with a 7-year-old son (a local elementary school student) and a 1-year-old daughter. The father answered our questions via email written in English. Six months after he came to Japan, in April, 2005, the remainder of his family arrived; they planned to return to Indonesia either in September, 2008 or March, 2009. This was the first time they had lived abroad. Their son was born in Indonesia, while their daughter was born in Japan. The children were cared for primarily by their mother. The father studied Japanese intensively for eight months, and the mother was now studying it with her Japanese friends and a volunteer's help.

Language Use in the Family

Indonesian and Japanese were spoken in the home. As Figure 3 shows, the estimated proportion of the language use between the parents and their son was not equal. Although the parents spoke Indonesian very frequently (mother → children: Indonesian 90%; father → children: Indonesian 80%), their son spoke to his parents mainly in Japanese (child → mother: Japanese 90%; child → father: Japanese 80%).

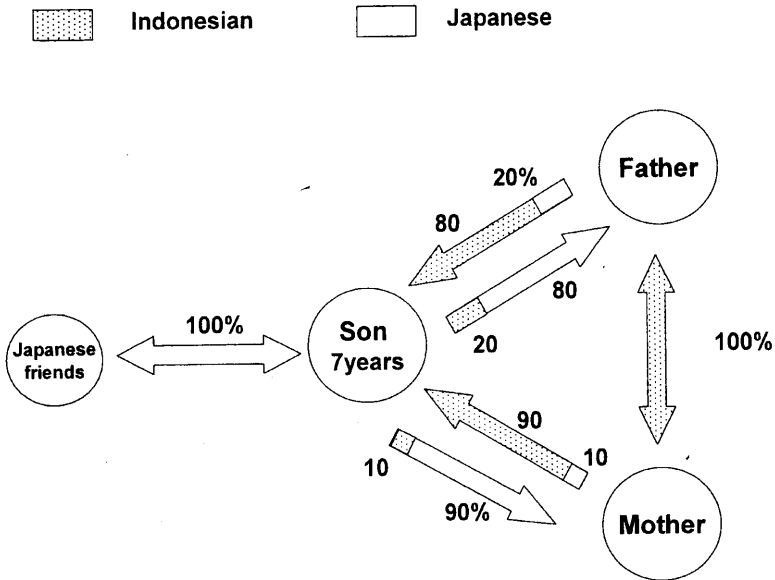


Figure 3. The language use in an Indonesian family (C).

Did the parents intentionally use different languages in their communication with their child?

Yes. They tried to communicate with their son in Indonesian daily.

Did the parents set a particular goal for their child's language ability?

Yes. They expected their son to speak both Indonesian and Japanese fluently.

Did the parents have any particular concerns about their child's language development?

Yes. The father was slightly concerned that his son would not understand Indonesian when the family returned home; however, he knew young child could learn languages quickly, and thus there would eventually be no serious problems.

Case 4 An Egyptian Family

Family Background

The parents were Egyptian, with a 7-year-old son (a local elementary school student) and a 4-year-old daughter (a local kindergarten pupil). The interview was carried out with both parents in a university cafeteria, and the mother answered most questions in English. The family had been in Japan for 3 and one-half years and were planning to return to Egypt by around 2010.

Language Use in the Family

In the home, only Arabic was spoken. The parents taught their children, especially their son, Arabic reading and writing. Figure 4 shows the estimated proportion of language use within the family. All members communicated in Arabic, although when the children were playing together, they tended to occasionally mix Japanese words into their conversation. The parents understood basic Japanese, however, they seemed to have difficulty engaging in a simple conversation.

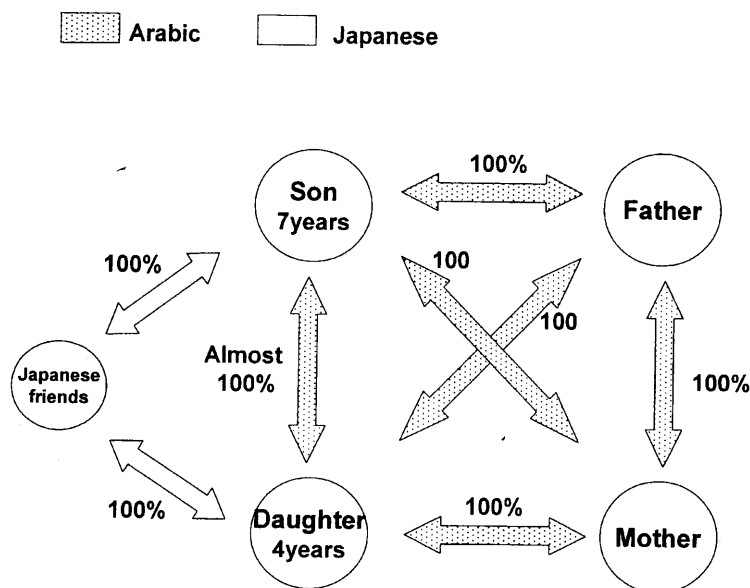


Figure 4. The language use in an Egyptian family.

Did the parents set a particular goal for their children's language ability?

Yes. They wanted their children to be fluent in Arabic.

Did the parents have any particular concerns about their children's language development?

Yes. However, the family planned on returning to Egypt in three years, so they were not seriously worried about their language use.

Case 5 A Chinese Family

Family Background

The parents were both Chinese, and they had two sons, one 15 years old (a local junior high school student) and the other 9 years old (a local elementary school student). The mother, who possessed an excellent command of Japanese, participated in our interview in a town caf?. The parents had been in Japan since 1987, with the exception of one and one-half years in Hong Kong. The father was also fluent in Japanese. The older son was born in Hong Kong, while the younger was born in Japan. The mother was a housewife whose primary occupation was caring for the children. The family did not have precise plans on when they might return to China.

Language Use in the Family

Chinese (Mandarin) and Japanese were used in the home. Figure 5 illustrates the estimated proportion of the language use in the family. There was an imbalance in language use between the mother and her sons, (mother → children: Chinese 50%, Japanese 50%; children → mother: nearly 100% Japanese). Between father and children, the percentage was not equal, however, the discrepancy was smaller than that observed with the mother.

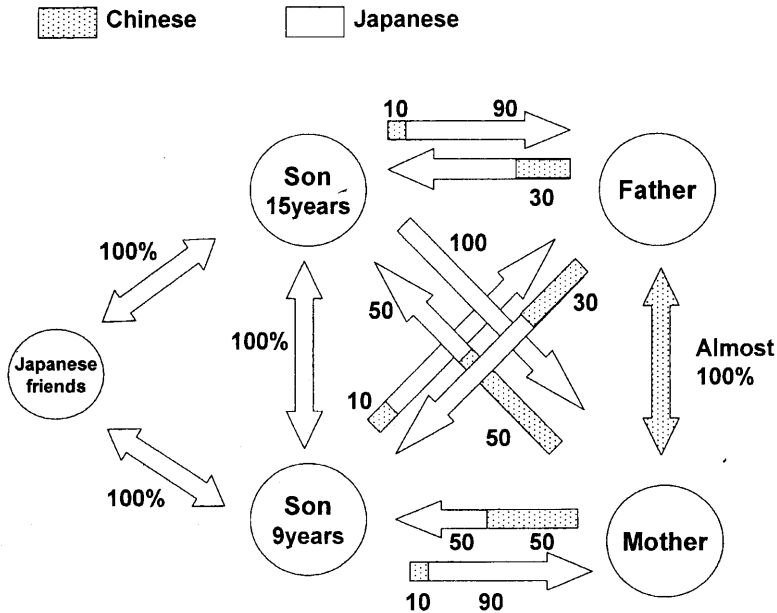


Figure 5. The language use in a Chinese family.

Did the parents intentionally use different languages in their communication with their child?

Yes. When the mother wanted to teach Chinese to the children, she intentionally switched to Chinese; however, the father tended to use Japanese because it was easier to communicate with the children.

Did the parents set a particular goal for their children's language ability?

Yes. The parents expected their children to be able to use Chinese at a native level; however, since both children had grown up in Japan, there were limitations in the extent to which the parents could teach them Chinese. As a result, the mother set up a Sunday school to teach Chinese along with other Chinese mothers in her community.

Did the parents have any particular concerns about their children's language development?

Yes. The children did not seem to be proud to be bilingual. Their Japanese also seemed to be slightly deficient, considering that their school performance showed relatively inferior performance in humanities compared with sciences.

Case 6 A Korean Family

Family Background

The parents were Korean, and their sons were 13 and 9 years old (both go to local schools). The family had been in Japan since 1992. The father, who had a perfect command of Japanese, participated in the interview at Tohoku university. The mother, also a fluent Japanese speaker, mainly took care of their children. The parents estimated that they would stay in Japan until their sons had grown up, and had no foreseeable plan to return to Korea.

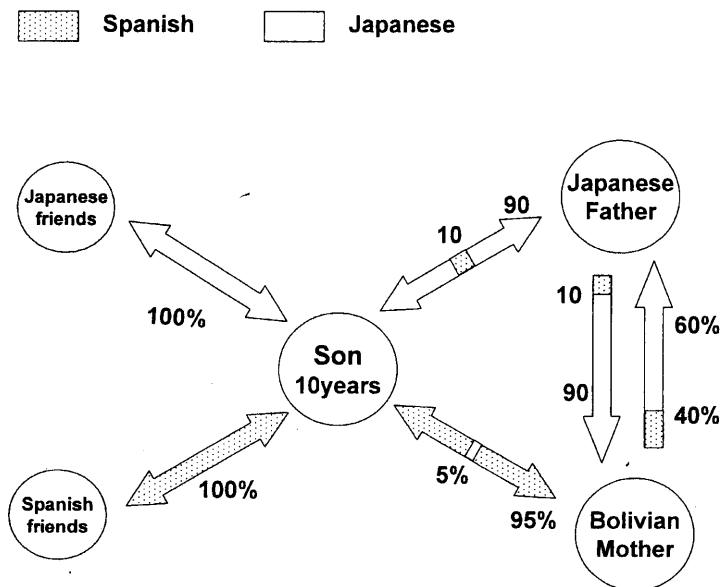


Figure 7. The language use in a family with Bolivian mother and Japanese father.

speak Japanese at an intermediate level. When their son was 6 years old, he and his mother lived in Spain for two and one-half years. Now in Japan, both parents took care of him equally. The mother answered the study questions via email written in English. The family does not have a clear plan regarding leaving Japan.

Language Use in the Family

Spanish and Japanese were spoken in the home. Figure 7 shows the estimated proportion of language use in the home. These proportions were well-balanced between both parents and their son (mother \leftrightarrow child: Spanish 95%, Japanese 5%; father \leftrightarrow child: Japanese 90%, Spanish 10%).

Did the parents intentionally use different languages in their communication with their child?

Yes. Because the parents expected their son to be competent in Spanish and Japanese, they decided that the father would talk to him in Japanese and the mother would use Spanish as much as possible.

Case 8 A Family with a Singaporean Mother and a Japanese Father

Family Background

The Mother was Singaporean, and the father was Japanese. They had a daughter (age 13) and a son (age 7), both going to local schools. The Mother, a native speaker of English and Chinese (Mandarin), had been in Japan since 1991, and had studied Japanese since then. She believes her family may well not leave Japan. The interview was conducted with her in a local library in Japanese (in which she is fluent).

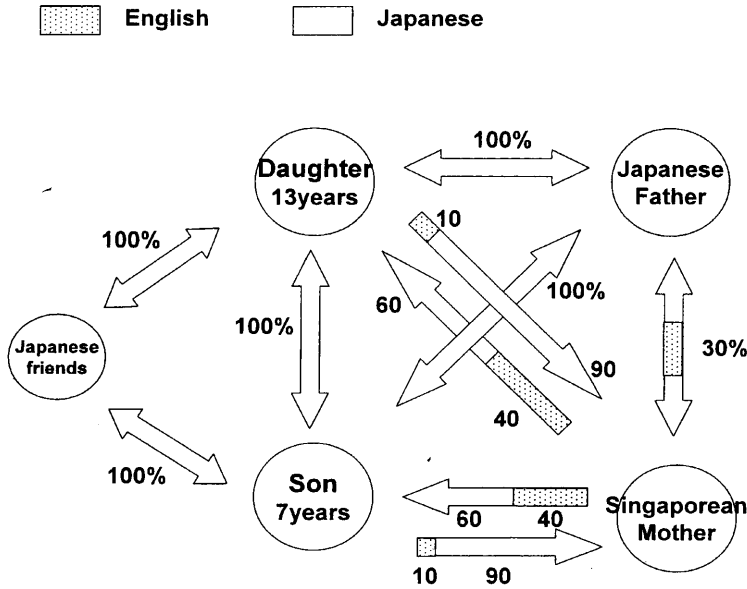


Figure 8. The language use in a family with Singaporean mother and Japanese father.

Language Use in the Family

English and Japanese were spoken in the home. Figure 8 shows the estimated proportion of language in the family. Although the father and children use only Japanese, the percentage of language use between the mother and children was not balanced (mother → children: English 40%, Japanese 60%; children → mother: English 10%, Japanese 90%).

Did the parents intentionally use different languages in their communication with their children?

Yes. Because the mother wanted the children to speak English, she was more likely to talk to them in English. She did not attempt to teach them Chinese because she thought it was too hard to learn.

Did the parents set a particular goal for their children's language ability?

Yes, the mother expected her children to speak English fluently so that they could communicate with relatives in Singapore. When her daughter was in elementary school, her mother taught her English using textbooks.

Case 9 A Family with an Australian Father and a Japanese Mother

Family Background

Family members included an Australian father and a Japanese mother, two sons (ages 5 and 3), and a daughter (age 1). The father first came to Japan in 1990 and worked there until 1993. After first going back to Australia, he and his wife returned to Japan in 2002. All of their children were born in Japan, and their sons attended a kindergarten that provided English education. Although the father understood simple Japanese, he could not read or write it; his wife, however,

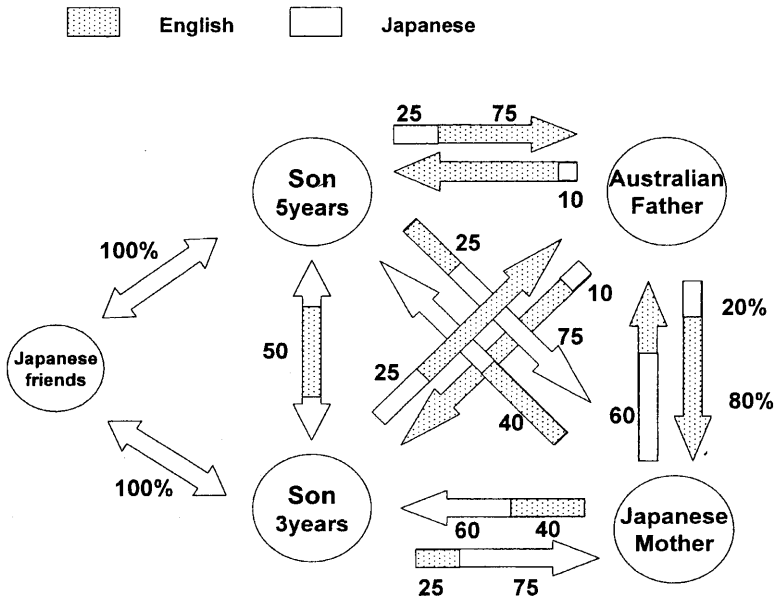


Figure 9. The language use in a family with Australian father and Japanese mother.

was quite competent in English. We conducted our interview with the father at his home, and spoke English. The family did not have foreseeable plan to go back to Australia.

Language Use in the Family

English and Japanese were spoken in the home. Figure 9 shows the estimated proportion of language use in the family. Compared to the pattern of language use between the father and children, that between the mother and children was less balanced (mother → children: English 40%, Japanese 60%; children → mother: English 25%, Japanese 75%).

Did the parents intentionally use different languages in their communication with their children?

No. They did not pay attention to alternating languages at the time.

Did the parents set a particular goal for their children's language ability?

Yes. They wanted their children to be bilingual in both English and Japanese, though they thought this might be difficult since they had been in Japan. The father, therefore, is teaching the children English almost every night, using educational books and audio programs.

Discussion

In this study, we examined the estimated proportion of language use in nine foreign families residing temporarily in Japan. Eight families used multiple languages in their home. Fisher's exact test revealed that the estimated percentage of languages used between mothers, fathers and children was significantly different. One of the most distinctive features in the seven out of nine families was the imbalance in language use between children and their mothers, a feature not seen

in communications between children and their fathers. It was also likely that parents' level of proficiency with each language did not directly relate to the pattern of their language use with their children.

The language mothers prefer to use may be influenced by their desire for their children to be competent in both the parents' first language and the local language (Japanese). Even though children are apt to speak Japanese more frequently, mothers may try to communicate with their children in their native language, perhaps because they want to provide their children with the opportunity to listen to and speak the language. Mothers may feel a large responsibility for language practices because in most families they are the children's primary caretakers, and spend much more time with them than the fathers do. Figures 1, 3, 5 and 9, for instance, show that mothers tended to talk with their children in languages not spoken in the community.

Another explanation for the findings described above could be the mother's potential ability to talk to her children in an effective way. Analysing mothers' speech to young children, Snow (1977) found that their talk contained special features; mothers are highly likely to use simple tenses and sentence structures with repetitive words, employing high pitched voices with clear intonation. It is possible that use of this so-called Child Directed Speech (CDS) enables mothers to adapt their speaking to their children's developmental level more effectively than fathers and siblings (Barton and Tomasello, 1994; Lanvers, 2004). Although Garnica (1977) insisted that over the age 5, children no longer get prosodic adjustments, other characteristics of CDS, including adjusting grammar and choosing an easier vocabulary, may remain. Thus, it may be possible that because mothers are good at fine tuning their speech to reflect their children's language level, they are better able to communicate with their children using the language in which the children are not fluent.

Fathers, on the other hand, tend to use the language that their children understand well, perhaps because of their poor ability to fine tune their speech depending of the level of child development. In addition, as studies in gender differences suggest, fathers talk to their children less than mothers do (e.g. Lanvers, 2004; Stoneman & Brody, 1981), and consequently they have less opportunity to influence the language use of their children.

As some parents told us during the interview, families living abroad temporarily tend to experience problems in communication within the family due to differing levels of language proficiencies. Children become highly competent at speaking the community language, whereas parents, particularly mothers who have less chance to socialize in the local community, do not.

This research found that many children in families temporary living abroad are required to use multiple languages in the home. As parents of bilingual children insisted, being a bilingual or multilingual can be advantageous, for example with regards to communicating with others, appreciating culture, and forming personality (Yamamoto, 2001). However, it is possible that excessive demands to practice multiple languages may be stressful for these children. It is therefore necessary that future studies investigate these stresses and the effects they have on the children.

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