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Beyond Performing Ethnicity

Junko Mori

Who Am I?—Performing or Downplaying Ethnicity

"Where are you from?" Asking Asian Americans this question can be considered a form of microaggression—an observation that has been so widely circulated that, unfortunately, it is now almost a cliché. While I am not an Asian American and not necessarily offended by this question, it still gives me pause. I was born in Tokyo, but lived in Okayama, Ibaraki, Kyoto, and back in Tokyo before moving to Wisconsin more than thirty years ago. Legally, I am a Japanese national and a permanent resident alien of the United States. I have lived longer in Madison than any other city, and as a taxpayer and homeowner, I consider myself a full-fledged Madisonian. In the eyes (and ears) of others, however, this may not always be the case.

A memorable event that served as a reminder of this reality occurred several years ago when I was interviewed for a student newspaper. In the interview request, the student writer explained that she was working on a feature about professors of foreign languages. Her email message included the following sample questions:

- How do nonnative speakers compare with native speakers in terms of teaching quality, student preference, and overall performance?
- What is it about our university's language programs that attracts foreign language teachers like you?
- In America, are the foreign teachers blending in? Any challenges?

As I wanted to support this student's initiative, I agreed to be interviewed. During the days leading up to our appointment, however, I contemplated how I could answer these sample questions, and "which me" I should foreground in the process. As an applied linguist, who has often adopted *membership categorization analysis* (Sacks 1992) as a conceptual framework for research, I could not help but notice a range of

categorization terms that appeared in the interview request and sample questions. Among them, those that might be applicable to me included "native speakers," "foreign language teachers," and "foreign teachers."

At the interview, the student's opening question was: "What brought you here?" This gave me an opportunity to objectify and historicize my own story, discussing how language education tends to be shaped by the social, political, and economic dynamics of a given time and place. I came to the United States at the peak of the Japanese economic bubble, when the teaching of Japanese language and culture was being heavily promoted on both sides of the Pacific. It was the late 1980s, and I had been working at a private firm in Tokyo but felt discouraged by a workplace climate that showed little impact from the Equal Employment Opportunity Law of 1985. So, I was longing for a change when I stumbled across an internship program developed by the State of Wisconsin to promote Japanese language education, and I joined the first cohort of thirteen Japanese dispatched to public schools throughout the state. The internship experience ignited my interest in Japanese language education. To solidify my qualifications to pursue a career in this area, I decided to embark on graduate study in Japanese linguistics at the University of Wisconsin-Madison (UW, hereafter). The student writer, a journalism major originally from China, appeared to be intrigued by my story.

Her subsequent questions, however, often made me derail, as I felt it necessary to challenge the assumptions behind her requests to compare native versus nonnative speakers, or foreign-born versus American professors. In my lengthy answers, I tried to underscore the diversity among the people these monolithic binary categories lump together and to encourage appreciation of the different sets of qualifications each individual can bring to the profession. I did so with the hope that she would consider reframing the discussion in her writing.

To my disappointment, however, the resulting article began with a portrayal of me as a "foreign" teacher, and included the following summation: "Like Mori, many other scholars from foreign countries come to UW to teach their native languages. These instructors bring an authenticity to the classroom that students highly value." In her defense, the writer attempted to incorporate many of the ideas I had tried to convey. Nevertheless, what her article foregrounded was the "authenticity" associated with "foreign teachers," or their ability to *perform ethnicity* in the classroom rather than their achievements as transnational, multilingual

scholars. This experience reminded me of the following observation shared by Kramsch and Zhang (2015: 89):

> Foreign-born, native speaker (NS) teachers enjoy a great deal of *de facto* symbolic capital. They are hired precisely because of their NSship and the contacts they maintain with the target country. . . . They are not seen as the scholars and professionals that many of them are, but as "mere" native speakers. . . . The fact that they are multilingual, cosmopolitan individuals, often with a high level of education, global connections, double vision, and with a deep understanding and tolerance of paradox, remains to a large extent unrecognized or undervalued.

When I first landed in the United States, my J-1 (Exchange Visitor) visa was indeed justified by *de facto* symbolic capital. As an intern for the Japanese Language and Culture Assistant Program, I visited a number of elementary and secondary classrooms, often wearing kimono or yukata on request and demonstrating origami, calligraphy, or proper use of chopsticks in not so fluent English. Performing ethnicity was precisely my *raison d'être* in my first year in the U. S.

However, as I have gained more competence and confidence in English, received graduate training and degrees, and eventually earned tenure, my desire to perform my ethnicity has worn off, for several reasons. First, for scholars to obtain and maintain a faculty position at an American institution, and to solidify our footing in academia, it is critical to be recognized by others for our professional identities—achievements gained through years of painstaking work—first and foremost. Second, when I began my graduate study in linguistics in the early 1990s, studies in comparative pragmatics that enhanced *Nihonjin-ron* "theories of Japanese uniqueness" were prevalent. Terms such as discernment, indirectness, *enryo* "restraint," and *sasshi* "emphatic guesswork," were (and still are to a degree) frequently used to describe idealized norms. As an individual who had always valued the ability to articulate one's viewpoint clearly, even to the extent of being considered "a nail that stuck out," I was rather bewildered by these static, essentialist descriptions of Japanese ways of communication. Third, as will be discussed further in the following section, as I began to assume leadership roles in which I coordinated and represented academic units larger than the Japanese program, I sometimes felt my Japanese identity—performed, ascribed, or perceived—getting in the way of developing trust and rapport. Nevertheless, given that my professional title—professor of Japanese language and linguistics—

subsumes a term that coincides with my ethnicity, it has not always been easy to deemphasize that part of me. Consequently, I have always wondered what kinds of assumptions others might make of me based on my title, name, and physical appearance as an Asian woman. The last three decades thus have been a journey in which I have constantly striven for a fine balance between the need to perform ethnicity and the need and desire to downplay it.

What Can I and Should I Do?—Contributing to a Departmental Restructuring Process

After holding my first faculty position at the University of Iowa for three years, I returned to my alma mater in 1999 and obtained tenure there in 2002. Since the late 2000s, I have held several leadership positions on campus, including chair of the Department of East Asian Languages and Literature (2008–2011); interim director of the Language Institute, whose mission is to promote language education and research on campus and beyond (2011–2013); and director of the Doctoral Program in Second Language Acquisition (SLA; 2014–2016). Among my various administrative experiences during this time, one of the most memorable was the restructuring of the academic units related to Asian studies.

In the late 2000s, campus leaders began to urge faculty to reexamine how we conducted our research and education in order to meet the demands of a changing society and the needs of a new generation of students. The directive to identify ways to increase efficiency and effectiveness was particularly pertinent to smaller departments, which were considered to have experienced disproportionate burdens of administration and possible difficulties in faculty governance. Under these circumstances, the need for two separate departments concerning Asia, the Department of East Asian Languages and Literature and the Department of Languages and Cultures of Asia, which covered the rest of Asia, began to be questioned. In fall 2014, the Associate Dean of Arts and Humanities formed a committee charged with developing recommendations regarding the future of Asian studies on campus. Thirteen members from nine different campus units were appointed to the committee, and Dr. Thongchai Winichakul, a Thai historian who had the experience of presiding over the Association of Asian Studies (AAS), served as its chair.

When I received the invitation to join this committee as one of the two language specialists, I asked myself my usual two questions: “Can I?” and “Should I?” Learning when and how to say no is one of the most important

lessons for anyone in any profession, but I know that I am a slow learner in this area. My internal dialogue at the time went like this:

> "Can I take on this responsibility while I am still directing the SLA program?—Maybe, but adding one more task means that I'll need to give up some family/personal time and/or some aspects of my teaching and/or research related activities."
>
> "Should I take on this responsibility?—Probably yes, because the recommendations produced by this committee will likely have a major impact on my own future life on campus."

To me, the most salient aspect of my identities for this particular committee was my disciplinary background rather than my ethnicity or gender. The significance of participating in the discussion and sharing my voice on the centrality of language education in area studies seemed to outweigh the possible burden. I have never regretted the decision. Indeed, I was pleased to see that the committee's final report included a section on the significance of language, which read as follows:

> The study of Asian languages is central to and inseparable from the scholarly and educational missions of this department…. As Asia becomes a significant partner and destination for our students in the future, UW Asian studies should facilitate the development of multilingual and transcultural competence which enables students to operate between languages and cultures as well as to reflect on their own roots through the lens of another language and culture.

Participating in this committee significantly broadened and deepened my perspectives on the intricate dynamics among academic disciplines and among different regions within Asia and beyond. It was also a refreshing experience to be part of a committee led by Dr. Winichakul, who skillfully balanced asserting his own vision and valuing others' viewpoints. Subsequently, a new committee was formed and charged with developing a restructuring proposal based on the 2014 committee's recommendations, and I was appointed its chair. While I knew it would be a challenging project, I did not hesitate to accept the assignment because I wanted to make sure that the language programs would come out well in the end. I also wanted to continue to prove that I am not a "mere" native speaker.

With the blueprint developed by the 2014 committee in hand, I led the new committee, which consisted of the chairs of the two academic departments concerned and the directors and associate directors of the three area studies centers responsible for East Asia, Southeast Asia, and South Asia. While the 2014 committee's task had been to explore conceptual frameworks and ideal (within reason) scenarios, the 2015 committee had to articulate the exact structure of the newly proposed department, including a detailed outline of the governance structure and precise lists of the required personnel, physical facilities, and financial resources.

As the idiom says, "The devil is in the details." One of the most challenging deliberations in the process, for instance, was to determine where to draw the boundaries of Asia and which languages should be housed in the new department. Previously, when I had become the chair of the Department of East Asian Languages and Literature, I had had to alter my frame of mind from focusing on the well-being of the Japanese program to appreciating the intricate dynamics of the three East Asian language programs. In hindsight, however, managing that transition was relatively straightforward because of the similarities among Chinese, Japanese, and Korean, which are the three most frequently taught Asian languages and are spoken in relatively affluent nations. Despite the recent push to recognize the multilingual and multicultural reality of every nation, for better or worse, the ideology of "one language, one nation, and one people" developed during the last century is still prevalent in Chinese, Japanese, and Korean societies. In contrast, languages spoken in other parts of Asia present much more complex conditions—both in reality and in ideology, these languages and their speakers are not neatly confined within national or regional boundaries. Where does Asia end and the Middle East or Eastern Europe begin? Indeed, this was one of the questions in which the new department envisioned engaging as we began to undertake transdisciplinary inquiries into the regions' past and present in our research and teaching. However, quite ironically, creating a departmental unit meant that we had to draw an arbitrary line for the sake of administrative efficiency. The final version of the proposal stated that the new department would house nine less commonly taught languages in addition to the three East Asian languages: Filipino, Indonesian, Hmong, Vietnamese, Thai, Tibetan, Hindi, Urdu, and Persian. Turkish, on the other hand, would move to a different department that included German, Nordic, and Slavic languages and beyond. This decision was supported by the

majority, but not by all the voting members, some of whom filed a dissenting opinion. Being a leader sometimes involves navigating a tough decision-making process and being the deliverer of bad news.

In addition to this decision concerning the languages, many other details had to be worked out with stakeholders who had many different interests and perspectives. UW underscores the notion of "shared governance," which "gives representation to academic staff, university staff, faculty and students, who all take part in making significant decisions concerning the operation of the university" (https://www.wisc.edu/governance/). This means that the restructuring proposal needed to be communicated to all who might be affected by the change to secure their support. We held a number of listening sessions to answer any questions they might have on the core ideas of the proposal.

Any major change can induce fear. In the listening sessions, we had to convince many skeptics, who strongly associated restructuring with budget reduction and/or loss of personnel. It was essential that we hold such sessions, make necessary modifications to the proposal, and gain the members' buy-in, but we also were constrained by the timeline proposed by the deans. The approval of the proposal by a series of decision-making bodies had to be secured in a timely manner so that the launch of the new department would align with the beginning of the new academic year. To ensure timely progress, I thought it was important to present a clear vision and concrete ideas to which stakeholders could respond, and then to listen to their viewpoints with care and empathy. We eventually succeeded in gaining more than a three-fourths majority vote in support of the restructuring proposal.

This proposal development process sometimes made me self-conscious about others' perceptions of me. Would they view me as a Japanese trying to take over Asia—like a repeat of colonial history?! The fact that the Japanese program had the largest number of tenured faculty at the time contributed to this apprehension. No one explicitly made such a comment, but I consciously downplayed my ethnicity and the stability of the Japanese program.

Shortly after the submission of the proposal, I ran into a member of the 2015 committee at a social event. When he was introducing me to his spouse, I heard him saying to her, "She's the benevolent dictator!" He said it in a joking fashion, and later apologized to me for using the epithet. I smiled back at him, as I liked this description of how I conducted myself in the project. It encapsulated my strengths and weaknesses as a leader and

recognized my achievements rather than my "authenticity" as a native-speaking Japanese instructor.

The new department is now in its sixth year, and in my view, it has grown stronger each year by adding new faculty, working out further details, and developing a new collective identity among its members. I can say with full conviction that the versatility established by the current departmental structure has enabled us to survive and thrive during the COVID-19 pandemic. Witnessing how the seeds planted by the two committees on which I served have taken root and flourished gives me a strong sense of accomplishment.

Who Are You? What Can You and Should You Do?—Advice to Future Leaders

After more than thirty years in the United States, I continue to ask myself, "Who am I?" and "What can I and should I do?" If you ask my husband, he might reveal that I often say negative things about myself. Reflecting back on what I did or didn't do, or what I said or didn't say, on a given day, I always find something that I wish I had done differently. But after talking things over with my husband and taking our dogs for a walk, I regain the courage to move on. Writing this article and thinking about what I could share with future leaders reminded me of some fundamentals of life.

First, engage in thorough self-reflection whenever an opportunity to lead (or even just participate in) a project presents itself. Before saying "yes" or "no" to the invitation, ask yourself the following questions: What are your strengths and weaknesses relevant to the particular project? How might you position yourself (or be positioned by others) in the project team? And what are possible burdens and rewards associated with the project? Asking yourself these questions and owning whatever decision you have made, I think, are essential.

Second, become observant of others' strengths and weaknesses, and their potential. This also helps you to determine which projects or tasks you are uniquely qualified for, and which projects or tasks you should pass up or delegate to others. In retrospect, I probably should have delegated more responsibilities to others when I was working on the restructuring project. For fear of missing the deadline, I kept things on a rather tight leash and this might have given the people around me the impression I was a bit of a "dictator," albeit a "benevolent" one.

Third, from time to time, remind yourself and your colleagues to step back and examine broader contexts, including the institutional context, the

fields of study, and the society in general, to evaluate whatever you are doing at the moment. Where are we heading? What will our world be like in five years, or ten years? Unexpected major events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, may throw us off track, but it is important to keep the big picture in mind, as the saying 木を見て森を見ず "You cannot see the woods for the trees" warns.

Last, but not least, establish support mechanisms and take care of yourself. To me, participating in multiple communities/affinity groups within my profession (e. g., the networks of UW alumni, the American Association of Teachers of Japanese, and the American Association of Applied Linguistics) as well as outside of the profession (e. g., a local dog agility group) helped me develop different perspectives and reevaluate my priorities in life. Further, as touched upon earlier, I must acknowledge that without the support of my understanding husband and my sweet dogs, I could not have made it this far. How one establishes support mechanisms will vary from one individual to another, but surely everyone needs professional and emotional support to lead one's life and to become a leader.

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