



## **Language Choice in a Multicultural Community: A Japan Share House Case Study**

*Kenwood Jularbal, Cyprene Lay-at*

University of the Cordilleras, Philippines

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.55248/gengpi.2022.3.8.40>

---

### **ABSTRACT**

Young Japanese urbanites who prefer integrated school/work/social lives often turn to share houses to meet their needs for higher-quality housing, social life outside of work, and a better living environment. With Japan's foreign population increasing yearly, share house set-ups geared towards international culture exchange have been increasingly popular, especially among young people. This kind of housing set-up that promotes multilingualism and multiculturalism piqued the interest of the researcher which brought this case study to analyze the domains of language use and choice of multilingual native Japanese living at a share house in Chiba, Japan. The case study also focused on the participants' language acquisition and maintenance. Findings reveal that Japanese is used for most of the participants' daily communication, while English is used as a universal language when communicating with non-native Japanese speakers. Some participants speak dialects that they use to communicate with their families, and some even speak a third, fourth, and fifth language which they use for work and travel abroad. Lastly, the participants were found to have acquired their mother tongue at home while their L2 to L5 was acquired from school and reinforced through their external environment.

Keywords: language choice, multilingual, multiculturalism, multilingualism, Japan, share house

---

### **INTRODUCTION**

In the early-2000s a new form of sharing, shea-hausu, appeared, initially in Tokyo and later in other metropolises, re-introducing communal living (kōkyō jūtaku), this time as an aspirational form of living for urban singles. The sector ostensibly caters to a demand for better quality homes, a social life outside work, and a desire for integrated lifestyles among young urbanites (Druta, 2021). To satisfy their desires for higher-quality housing, social life outside of work, and a better living environment, young urban Japanese people who prefer integrated school, work, and social lives frequently turn to sharing houses. With Japan's foreign population growing by the year, share-house arrangements focused on international cultural interchange have grown in popularity, particularly among young people. This type of housing arrangement greatly fosters multilingualism and multiculturalism.

Multilingualism is a multifaceted phenomenon that is alive and well. Today, the importance of multilingualism has expanded beyond its private local duties to a much greater worldwide significance. The use of multiple languages, either by a single speaker or a group of speakers, is referred to as multilingualism. In the population of the world, multilingual speakers are thought to outweigh monolingual speakers (Tucker, 1999). Thus, people who desire to engage in trade, globalization, and cultural openness should consider becoming multilingual. According to Kennison (2013), the so-called first language, which is the case for multilingual people, was learned and preserved during childhood (L1). The first language is typically picked up outside of formal education, however, experts dispute the exact mechanisms by which this happens. It is also frequently referred to as the mother tongue.

In psycholinguistics, the influence of multilingualism is apparent in a multitude of theories and concepts. One particular theory is Noam Chomsky's Language Acquisition Device or LAD. Santrock (2008) defines LAD as a system that enables language learners to accurately replicate the grammar rules and other features of the language utilized by speakers around them. Chomsky (1965) claims that this device degrades over time and is not usually available to adolescents. The implications of this in the field of education is significant because children's formative years are for the most part spent studying in school. Toga (2006), argues that the formative years of a child's life are between the ages of 6 and 13 or middle childhood. The period of life known as adolescence normally lasts from the time a person becomes 15 until they are considered to be of legal age. Barnett (1995) further supports this by stating that the quality of children's care is another important component in their growth. Child-care programs may be advantageous to the development of children's learning abilities and social skills.

Fathman (1975) conducted research on the relationship between age and second language productive ability and concluded that

age disparities in the rate of learning of English morphology, syntax, and phonology exist, but the sequence of acquisition in second language learning does not. Multilingualism and its implications in second language acquisition are also crucial. According to Kaplan (1966), students in second language classes frequently struggle with thinking in the target language because they are impacted by their native language and cultural tendencies. He further asserts that the foreign-student paper is out of focus in second language classes because the foreign student uses rhetoric and a process of thought that contradicts the expectations of the native reader.

This research aims to explore the following research questions:

1. How did the participants acquire the languages they speak and how do they maintain them?
2. What are the participants' language choices and use in terms of their:
  - a. L1
  - b. L2
  - c. L3

---

## METHODOLOGY

This research is based on a case study of a share house in Chiba prefecture, Japan. Thematic analysis was used as it involved the use of primary data collection methods as the most suitable route for the attainment of the study objectives. The participants of this study involve three multilingual Japanese natives chosen through convenient sampling. Data was collected through the use of personal interviews and observation schedules. The unobtrusive observation by the researchers proved worthwhile as it provided the paper with an independent conclusion of the linguistic processes in the share house. Lastly, comprehensive data analysis was done using the ethnographic approach of quotations and descriptions following Landweer's (2008) second indicator of Ethnolinguistic Vitality.

---

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Descriptions of Five Multilingual Individuals Living Together at a Share House in Chiba Prefecture, Japan

In the present study, relevant data from five multilingual adult Japanese native participants were chosen in order to determine language choice and use as well as the factors that influence such linguistic choices. The participants were conveniently found as they live together in one share house and were recruited through individual connections. The interview was conducted one on one and in one session. The participants' names were changed in order to preserve their privacy. Some of the participants had lived in the same share house for three years, and some for a little over a month.

### Participant 1: Bata-san

#### Sociolinguistic Information:

Bata-san is a 33-year-old Japanese of Okinawan ancestry. Currently, he is working as a researcher majoring in Latin American studies, and will soon fly to England to work on his Ph.D. in the same field. He speaks an Okinawan dialect, Japanese, English, and Spanish. His mother tongue is Okinawan, whereas Japanese is his L1; English his L2; and Spanish his L3.

#### Language formation and maintenance:

Bata-san was exposed to Okinawan dialect since birth. It is the language that he uses to communicate with his family and friends in their locale. On the other hand, his English is an L2 learned at school from elementary to university and reinforced while socializing with his American friends living at a U.S. military base close to his home. His Spanish is an L3 learned at university and reinforced while living in Latin America. He had lived in Nicaragua for 4 years and worked as an ambassador for the Japanese embassy.

#### Language choice and use:

He uses standard Japanese on a daily basis at work and in the share house. Occasionally he would use English to communicate with the foreigners living in the sharehouse. In addition, he uses English whenever he travels abroad in order to make friends and build his network. During his stay in Nicaragua, he used Spanish as his main language for communication inside and outside of work. In September 2022, he will fly to England to pursue his post-graduate degree in Latin American studies. Consequently, this will give him plenty of opportunities to

use English and develop his communication skills in the language.

#### **Participant 2: Nina-san**

##### **Sociolinguistic Information:**

Nina-san is a 31-year-old teacher and social volunteer from Kyushu, Japan. She had taught at the nursery level for 4 years. After that, she worked as a social volunteer for the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), an agency that provides technical cooperation and other forms of aid promoting economic and social development in developing countries. In addition, she had traveled to more than 100 countries both as a tourist and as a volunteer worker. She speaks Japanese, Kyushu dialect, English, Spanish, Russian, French, and some local languages in the countries she visited. Her mother tongue is Japanese, whereas Kyushu dialect is her L1; English her L2; Spanish her L3; Russian her L4; and French her L5.

##### **Language formation and maintenance:**

Nina-san was exposed to standard Japanese since birth, with the occasional exposure to Kyushu dialect from her grandparents. Japanese is the language that she uses to communicate with her family and friends in their locale. On the other hand, her English is an L2 acquired at school from elementary to university and reinforced while traveling and volunteering abroad, especially in English-speaking countries. She had lived and worked in Australia on a working holiday visa for a year where she was able to further develop her proficiency in the language. In her spare time, she often visited various libraries in the country where free English lessons and conversation practices were held. On the other hand, her Spanish is an L3 learned informally while living in Latin American countries like Spain, Mexico, Guatemala, and Argentina. Russian is her L4 acquired when she traveled to Russia. And lastly, French is her L5 acquired from French-speaking countries like Senegal and other African countries. She had learned mostly through the direct method of language acquisition, aided by some travel language books she brought to the countries she visited. Most notably, she had acquired vocabulary related to food and culinary.

##### **Language choice and use:**

She uses standard Japanese on a daily basis at work and in the share house. She often communicates in English with the foreigners living in the share house. In addition, she uses English whenever she volunteers and travels abroad. She often adapts to the countries she visits by learning and speaking their language. These languages include Spanish, Russian, French, and some dialects. Consequently, this gave her the opportunity to develop her multilingual skills. She was also able to use her multilingualism when she worked as a concierge for the Tokyo 2020 Olympics.

#### **Participant 3: Lisa-san**

##### **Sociolinguistic Information:**

Lisa-san is a 24-year-old from Hiroshima, Japan. She has a degree in international studies where she developed her multilingualism as well as cultural knowledge. Currently, she is working as a salesperson for a company in Tokyo. She speaks Hiroshima dialect, Japanese, English, Korean, French and Bisaya. Her mother tongue is Japanese, whereas Hiroshima dialect is her L1; English her L2; French her L3; Korean her L4; and Visayan her L5.

##### **Language formation and maintenance:**

Lisa-san was exposed to standard Japanese since birth, with the occasional exposure to Hiroshima dialect from her parents and friends. On the other hand, her English is an L2 acquired at school from elementary to university and reinforced while traveling and studying every summer in Davao City, Philippines. After studying English in Davao City, she developed a passion for the country which extended to her learning the Visayan language, her L5, and Filipino culture. She had also studied French, her L3, informally because of her dream of traveling in France. Finally, her love for Korean culture also brought her to learn and develop her proficiency in the Korean language, her L4 which was further reinforced by her Korean-native friends and her travel to the country.

##### **Language choice and use:**

She uses standard Japanese on a daily basis at work and in the share house. Also, she communicates in English with the foreigners living in the share house. On the other hand, she uses Korean whenever she travels to South Korea and meets up with her friends in the country. She is also able to keep in touch with her friends in Davao City through SMS and calls where they talk both in Visayan and English. She is currently processing her application as a volunteer for JICA where she is expected to have more exposure to English, and French.

---

## CONCLUSION

The case study has presented findings and discussions of multilingualism, language acquisition, maintenance, choice, and use of Japanese natives living together in a share house in Japan. From the findings, it can be concluded that their mother tongue is acquired and developed at home whereas their L2, L3, L4, and L5 are acquired and maintained through formal education, work, and travel abroad. In addition, the case studies of the three trilingual individuals portray a clear dominance of Japanese in the social and working domains, and a preference for English as a universal language when communicating with non-native Japanese. In cases where English is not understood by both the addressee and addresser, the participants use their L3, L4, or L5 wherever possible and necessary. In addition, based on the interview conducted and observations by the researcher, language preference in these individuals appears to be a consequence of social environment and context.

---

## REFERENCES

- Aqad, M. H. A. (2021). Multilingualism and Personal Health Benefits: Connecting the Dots. In (Ed.), *Multilingualism - Interdisciplinary Topics*. IntechOpen. <https://doi.org/10.5772/intechopen.99855>
- Barnett, W. Steven (Winter 1995). "Long-Term Effects of Early Childhood Programs on Cognitive and School Outcomes". *The Future of Children*. 5 (3): 25–50. doi:10.2307/1602366. JSTOR 1602366.
- Chomsky, Noam (1965). *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax*. MIT Press.
- Druta, O. (2021) Living alone together in Tokyo share houses, *Social & Cultural Geography*, 22:9, 1223-1240, DOI: 10.1080/14649365.2020.1744704
- Fathman, Ann (1975). "The Relationship Between Age and Second Language Productive Ability". *Language Learning*. Wiley. 25 (2): 245–253. doi:10.1111/j.1467-1770.1975.tb00244.x. ISSN 0023-8333.
- Fishman, J. A. (1972). Domains and the relationship between micro-and macro- sociolinguistics. In J.J.Gumperz and D. Hymes (eds) *Directions in sociolinguistics: The ethnography of communication*, 435-453. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Kaplan, Robert B. (1966). "Cultural thought patterns in intercultural education". *Language Learning*. 16 (1–2): 1–20. doi:10.1111/j.1467-1770.1966.tb00804.x.
- Kennison, Shelia M. (30 July 2013). *Introduction to language development*. Los Angeles: SAGE Publications. ISBN 978-1-4129-9606-8. OCLC 830837502.
- Oana Druta & Richard Ronald (2021) Living alone together in Tokyo share houses, *Social & Cultural Geography*, 22:9, 1223-1240, DOI: 10.1080/14649365.2020.1744704
- Santrock, John W. (2008). *Bilingualism and Second-Language Learning. A Topical Approach to Life-Span Development* (4th ed.) (pp. 330–335). New York, NY: McGraw-Hill Companies, Inc.
- Toga AW, Thompson PM, Sowell ER (2006). "Mapping brain maturation". *Trends in Neurosciences*. 29 (3): 148–59. doi:10.1016/j.tins.2006.01.007. PMC 3113697. PMID 16472876.
- Tucker, G. Richard (1999), *A Global Perspective on Bilingualism and Bilingual Education* (PDF), Carnegie Mellon University, retrieved 8 May 2018