

What Border Are They Crossing?

—A Few Sociolinguistic Issues with
Foreign-born Writers of Japanese

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Since LEVY Hideo⁽¹⁾ made his debut with *A Room Where the Star-Spangled Banner Cannot Be Heard* in 1992, writers originally from other cultures writing in Japanese not only emerged, but have been rapidly increasing in number. That writers write in a language they have not grown up speaking is a widespread global phenomenon, and Japanese is by no means the only language that has witnessed it. However, so far, most of the writers writing in a so-called second or 'foreign' language write in Western languages, such as English, French, or German. The fact that foreign-born writers are writing in Japanese indicates not only a linguistic and cultural influx, but also a communicative transflux between Japan and other parts of the world.

Unfortunately, a satisfactory term has not yet been coined to denote these writers. I hasten to point out that personally, I do not automatically assume such a term is necessary. Writers of English who did not grow up speaking the language, like the literary masters Joseph Conrad and Vladimir Nabokov, or like the more recent Yiyun Li and Ha Jin, have not been put into a category that indicate they were/are not native speakers of English. It seems even more natural, for better or for worse, to readers of English-language literature that writers originally from former

British colonies like Salman Rushdie, Ben Okri, and Michael Ondaatje should be writing in English. Generally speaking, in the English-speaking world, readers seem to feel less compelled to place such writers in a box and seal it with a label. In contrast, the Japanese-speaking world seems to be more eager to put the abovementioned writers' counterparts in a category and give it a name. Here, my point is not that these Japanese-language writers need to be given a collective label; rather, I am trying to say that labels have been invented—none of which fits—and that if a name seems necessary, we might as well agree on a term that is politically as well as linguistically acceptable.

Two most frequent terms that have been given these writers are *border-crossing writers* and *Nihongo* [literally, the language of Japan] *writers*. Either term is lacking in accuracy, or indeed, fairness. These writers might also be called non-Japanese writers, or non-native-speaking Japanese-language writers, but these terms do not do them justice, either. I will return to the discussion of these terms later. For the purpose of this paper, I shall call them, for lack of a better term, *foreign-born writers of Japanese*.

I must also add that I do not deem it self-evident that foreign-born writers of Japanese should be compared with one another. I believe that writers in general should be compared first and foremost according to their writings, and not by some seemingly relevant and yet intrinsically arbitrary standards. Few writers approve of such comparisons. For instance, Korean-American writer Chang-rae Lee has often been compared with Japanese-British writer Kazuo Ishiguro, even though their writing styles have very little in common. When asked about the comparison in an interview, Chang-rae Lee replies:

... I don't find it as obviously as anything [more] than a flattering comparison ... but I just think that it's an easy one to make.

... I think it makes me like him from other people's view. First of all that we're Asian and that we live in other places. So there's something to that, but ... to compare me to some other writer who probably wasn't Asian-American, whose story had some similarities—that wouldn't bother me.⁽²⁾

It should not be taken for granted that because they are both of Asian descent, both male, have both moved to an English-speaking country at an early age (Lee to the US at age three, Ishiguro to the UK at age five) and are both writing fiction in English, it should follow naturally that Lee and Ishiguro are comparable as writers. In the same way, MIZUMURA Minae, who has spent a significant part of her life in the US and who wrote her debut novel, *Shishôsetsu* [*An Autobiographical Novel*]: *From Left to Right* (1998), bilingually in Japanese and English, has expressed her discontentment about being compared with LEVY Hideo, American writer writing in Japanese, and with TAWADA Yoko, Japanese writer writing in Japanese and German. Mizumura argues that the three of them are not only different in personal temperament, but also in social makeup (for which Mizumura uses the Japanese word *kôzô*, or 'structure').⁽³⁾ I must make it clear that I am discussing these writers here only because the present paper intends to explore the sociolinguistic aspects of these writers who write in Japanese as a vernacular but non-native language. The writers' respective literary merits should certainly be discussed, and would probably be best discussed separately, but those discussions will not be the main focus of this paper.

Here, I shall first attempt to provide an overview of foreign-born writers of Japanese, focussing mostly on prose writers, and then discuss the naming, or rather, misnaming of these writers, and the frequently asked question: *Why do they write in Japanese?* In my discussion, I shall touch on sociolinguistic issues such as the ownership of a language, the concept of the native speaker, language proficiency of multilingual adults, and the target audience of literary works written in a specific language.

An overview of foreign-born writers of Japanese

LEVY Hideo is generally considered the first foreign-born Japanese-language writer to appear on the Japanese literary scene. The writer's real name is Ian Hideo Levy, but despite his middle name, he does not have Japanese ancestry. Levy's father, who was a diplomat, named him Hideo after a Japanese-American friend.⁽⁴⁾ Born to a Jewish-American father and a Polish-American mother, LEVY Hideo spent his childhood and youth in the US, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Japan, and is at least trilingual. His fictional works written in Japanese have won three Japanese literary prizes, and *Tian'anmen*, (1996) was nominated for the prestigious Akutagawa Award (the Akutagawa Ryunosuke Literary Award), arguably the Japanese equivalent of the Man Booker Prize in the UK or the Pulitzer Prize in the US in terms of recognition from the public.

Levy's fiction is almost always semi-autobiographical. His debut work, *A Room Where the Star-Spangled Banner Cannot Be Heard* (1992), is set in Japan, in the year 1967, when the actual author was seventeen. The main character is a rebellious and confused Jewish-American young man of seventeen, the son of a diplomat working in the Yokohama American Consulate, who feels unaccepted by both the Americans and the Japa-

nese, and eventually runs off with a Japanese friend to Shinjuku, a busy area in Tokyo where his father has forbidden him to visit. The aforementioned *Tian'anmen* and Levy's most recent fictional work *Fake Water* (2008) each describes a journey that a trilingual Jewish-American man takes in modern China. The autobiographical element in these works, too, is unmistakable, and Levy constantly provides descriptions and asks questions about being multilingual and multicultural. *Tian'anmen*, for example, is narrated in Japanese, but incorporates numerous conversational exchanges in Chinese and English. The reader is shown a large amount of linguistically raw material, usually unprocessed, though sometimes translated into Japanese. English and Chinese words are given to the reader as they have been said in the fictitious world, thus providing a faithful reflection of the protagonist's trilingual mind. Descriptions of the protagonist's mind switching between languages are also presented. Here is an example from *Fake Water*:

Wo³ de fu⁴qin shi⁴... [我的父親是...] he started to say, but when the standard language of the Mainland was making its way out of his mouth, the language of the Island Country also echoed in his head.

Watashi no chichi wa... [私の父は...]

And suddenly he realised that he did not know how to say *deshita* in the Continental Language.

He panicked, trying to grab in the sombre air the past tense that did not exist. He could not find *deshita*. He tried to piece together broken words.

My father Jewish. Like your husband.⁽⁵⁾

(translation mine)

Here the main character tries to find the Chinese equivalent of the Japanese word *deshita*, or 'was', the past tense of the verb 'to be', but in vain. Levy's trilingual and tricultural experiences are what set him apart from the majority of his readers, and constantly drawing attention to these experiences may be as much a way of self-expression as a way of self-discovery.

The next foreign-born novelist writing in Japanese that received a prestigious literary prize is another Westerner: David Zoppetti. Originally from Switzerland, Zoppetti came to Japan in the 1980s to study Japanese literature at Doshisha University in Kyoto. He won the Subaru Literary Award in 1996 with his novel *Ichigen-san* [*First-Timers*], which is about a Western young man studying Japanese literature at a university in Kyoto (here, too, the autobiographical element is evident), who reads more Japanese literature than the average Japanese person, and yet has to be asked questions like 'You, Japanese *hashi* (chopsticks), OK?' 'You, Japanese *kanji* (Chinese characters), OK?' everywhere he goes. He compares junior high school pupils on school trips to swarms of locusts, as they pass him by in the streets of Kyoto shouting 'Hello! Hello!' in English as if they were robots (so he calls them).⁽⁶⁾ Just as he feels trapped about being always singled out simply because he looks different, he meets a Japanese girl, Kyoko, who cannot see, and during the sessions in which he reads books aloud to her as a semi-volunteer, they fall in love. Kyoko turns out to be the only person that looks beyond his accent and the occasional grammatical clumsiness in his Japanese and sees him for who he really is. He attributes this to the fact that Kyoko cannot see and cannot therefore distinguish his looks from those of most Kyoto residents,⁽⁷⁾ but other than the fact that Kyoko cannot see, it may well be their respective experiences of being part of a minority that

bring them together. The novel was nominated for the Akutagawa Ryunosuke Award in 1997, and cinematised in 2000 by director MORIMOTO Isao, with the well-known actress SUZUKI Honami as Kyoko, and British actor Edward Atterton as the Western student.

The son of a German-speaking Swiss father and an American mother, Zoppetti is pentalingual,⁽⁸⁾ and like Levy, he also explores the issues of cultural and linguistic identity in his fictional works. However, unlike Levy, when Zoppetti writes in Japanese, he writes only in Japanese. His Japanese style is elaborate. His extensive reading of Japanese literature, his vast knowledge of Kyoto culture, and his frustration of being perceived as someone he is not are all apparent on the page. His writing no doubt resonates with non-Japanese readers who have extensive knowledge of the Japanese language and culture. An Amazon reader review under the name Paul Sminkey reads: 'I should like all Japanese people to read this book.... I feel the same as the main character.... What Zoppetti is trying to advocate is probably that true globalisation is not about speaking English, but about accepting foreigners in the true sense of the word. I would like to see more Japanese people like Kyoko.'⁽⁹⁾ (translation mine)

Zoppetti's second and only other novel so far, *Alegrias* (2000), explores the reverse situation: a young Japanese ballerina going to study in Canada, befriending her Hong Kong roommate, and learning flamenco from Spanish dancers. Like *Ichigen-san*, *Alegrias* also asks fundamental questions about identity: where we have come from, where we are going, and who we are. These seem to be the central themes of Zoppetti's works. In a 2001 interview, he described himself as a linguistic chameleon who changed colours according to the language he spoke, and admitted that for a long time he had not been able to come to terms with only one

identity.⁽¹⁰⁾

In 2000, Boyanhishig, an Inner-Mongolian poet who had earned his master's degree in Japanese literature from Hosei University in Tokyo, published a collection of poems and essays, *The Archetype of Nostalgia: Notes Left for Naran [Japan]*, which received immediate critical acclaim. It is interesting to note that Boyanhishig is also trilingual, in Mongolian, Chinese, and Japanese. His debut work did not win a literary award, but an award named after him was established in the same year. The Boyan Award still exists today under the new name of the Literary Award for International Students, with the purpose of discovering literary talent among international students in Japan. Two writers I am going to mention shortly made their respective first appearances on the Japanese literary scene by winning this award.

As Boyanhishig had already established himself as a well-known poet in Inner-Mongolia, he combines simple Japanese words in surprising ways and brings fresh metaphors into the Japanese language. In one essay, he confesses that he cannot ride a horse, and that despite being the eldest son, he has passed his father's *urga* (a long stick with a lasso on the end used to capture animals) on to one of his younger brothers, thus giving up on the nomad life. He continues:

... I decided to create my own nomadic empire on writing paper. My land is not vast, but when I turn a page, rich soil lies in front of me. There have been horses who galloped across my dreams. There have been stubborn blue goats. There have been sheep who kept their silence till the day they died, and cows who held grand funerals for their friends. There have been camels who slowly appeared, as if trying to accentuate the deserts in moonlight. And there have

also been wolves.

I plough with my pen. The buckwheat I grow on mountain slopes
has a fine taste. My childhood dreams break into tiny white blossoms
on paper. And when words ripen, the petals fall.⁽¹¹⁾

(translation mine)

The extended metaphor of the writing paper as the Mongolian steppes here evidently comes from someone who has lived on the steppes and knows them well. The horse, the goat, the sheep, the cow, and the camel (all of which appeared in the above quotation) are called the Five Animals in traditional Mongolian culture, and are considered indispensable to the nomadic life. Certain parts of Eastern Inner-Mongolia are known for producing good buckwheat, grown on mountain slopes, and the white blossoms refer to the tiny buckwheat flowers. Such linguistic and cultural fusion is recurrent in Boyanhishig's works, and one might say that this sort of fusion has enriched literature written in Japanese.

In 2008, Chinese-born writer YANG Yi made the news by becoming the first non-native Japanese speaker to win the prestigious Akutagawa Award. Yang had first won the Bungakukai Award for New Writers with *Wang-chan* (2007), which was nominated for the Akutagawa Award, but was not chosen. She then wrote *A Morning When Time Blurs* (2008) in three months, which finally won the much-coveted Award.

Yang writes about the lives of Chinese people living in Japan in a plain, unassuming style. She says herself that her writing style, just like her personality, is rough and 'continental', as in large-scale and inattentive to details.⁽¹²⁾ She has been both criticised and praised for her writing style. TSUJIHARA Noboru, one of the judges that awarded her the Bungaku-

kai Award for New Writers, wrote that he had not thought highly of Yang's manuscript initially, but that as he was counting its faults one by one at the committee meeting, he gradually realised that what he was saying worked in the manuscript's favour, and that at the end of his tirade, he announced that now he thought Yang's work was actually worthy of the Award. He began to realise that the warmth and generosity of the character Wang-chan came from the author's 'unbiased and unclouded point of view' as well as her acute powers of observation.⁽¹³⁾ In a way, this might be representative of the view of many readers. Yang's writing style might not be considered 'literary' (although there are probably as many definitions of 'literary' as there are readers) by many, but her unpretentiousness and deceptively simple charm are perhaps what draw her readers into the fictional worlds she creates.

In contrast to YANG Yi, Iranian-born Shirin Nezamafi, who won the Bungakukai Award for New Writers a year and a half later, demonstrates much more delicacy in her writing. Her novella, *White Paper* (2009), tells the story of a teenage girl who moves from Tehran to a small town near the Iran-Iraq border in the 1980s and falls in love with a boy in her school. The boy, despite being the best student at the school and receiving the offer from a university in Tehran to study medicine, decides to join the army and go to war. Nezamafi's style shows the subtlety of an adolescent girl's feelings and thoughts. One stylistic trait that the judges commented on was that the novella was void of the phrase *watashi-wa* (I with the participle that indicates the personal pronoun is in the subjective case) even though it was a first-person narrative, and one of them wondered whether it was a linguistic trait of Persian or a deliberate stylistic choice on the author's part.⁽¹⁴⁾ In fact, the phrase *watashi-wa* does exist in Nezamafi's *White Paper*, but its

appearance is rare,⁽¹⁵⁾ and in terms of linguistic convention, its quasi-absence from the story is most probably statistically significant. In response to this issue, Nezamafi asserts that one would specify the subject of a sentence when writing in Persian, and that by omitting the subject in *White Paper*, she wanted to present Iran of the time through the teenage girl's eyes and not draw attention to the protagonist herself.⁽¹⁶⁾ *White Paper*, like some of the other works mentioned before, was also nominated for the Akutagawa Award.

I would like to make brief mention of two non-Japanese poets who write in Japanese: Arthur Binard, American poet and essayist who has won three Japanese literary prizes for his collections of poems and essays as well as a prize for picture books, and TIAN Yuan, Chinese poet and translator who won the H-shi Award, arguably the most prestigious award for poetry in Japan, in 2010. They have both become increasingly influential in literary Japan. Tian also happens to be the first winner of the Boyan Award (2001), while Nezamafi won the same Award in 2006.

The (Mis-)Naming of Foreign-born Writers of Japanese

The writers I am discussing in this paper have most frequently called border-crossing (*ekkyō*) writers or Nihongo writers in Japan. It is also possible to call them non-Japanese writers of Japanese or non-native-speaking Japanese-language writers. However, none of these terms is accurate, and each indicates sociolinguistic myths that are rampant in most societies. I would like to discuss these terms here one by one, and what defective discourse each represents.

It is probably sensible to rule out the term 'non-Japanese writers of

Japanese' immediately, even before our discussion begins. The reason for that is the term focuses on a writer's race (and possibly nationality), and thus does not take into account persons of Japanese descent who have been raised overseas and who may not speak Japanese, or more relevantly, non-Japanese individuals who have grown up in Japan speaking Japanese, among whom writers have indeed emerged. History has its fingerprints on this phenomenon. As Korea used to be Japan's colony (1910-45), many Koreans found themselves settled for quite some time in Japan by the end of World War II. Some returned to where they had come from; others chose to stay. Those that stayed regained their Korean nationality now that Korea was no longer part of Japan. For historical and personal reasons, many of these permanent residents of Japan have chosen not to become citizens of the country, and this stance extends beyond the first generation into second and third generations. Although the tradition of Japanese-language literature by Korean writers is an established one and dates back to late nineteenth century even before Japan's colonisation officially began in 1910, in the contemporary context, *zainichi* (literally '[residing] in Japan') Korean literature refers to literature written in Japanese by ethnically Korean writers who are permanent residents (or in some cases, citizens) of Japan. It would be impossible for the term 'non-Japanese writers of Japanese' to exclude the *zainichi* Korean writers, who are all native speakers of Japanese, and therefore the term would not serve our purpose here. In the following pages, I shall discuss the other three terms used to denote foreign-born writers of Japanese one by one.

Border-crossing writers?

'Border-crossing (*ekkyō*) writers' was probably the first label used to

denote foreign-born writers of Japanese. Being a metaphor, the term 'border-crossing' has a poetic tone to it and has sometimes been used even by foreign-born writers of Japanese themselves. David Zoppetti has said in an interview:

When I give talks, I often tell my audience about *ekkyō* writers, and about the global phenomenon of *ekkyō* literature.

One of my secret dreams is that if I get better-known, I'd like to invite *ekkyō* writers around the world ... to an 'Ekkyō Literature Forum'.⁽¹⁷⁾

(translation mine)

On the other hand, Shirin Nezamafi has expressed her disapproval of the phrase in a published dialogue with YANG Yi, saying that she does not like the idea of declaring the bounds of Japanese literature as being 'from here to here', nor being expected to write only a predetermined kind of fiction in Japanese.⁽¹⁸⁾

There is probably no denying that the word *ekkyō* has a negative over-tone. The word implies that the action is illegitimate. No one speaks of the foreigners who are staying in Japan legally as border-crossing aliens. The word only refers to people who cross borders without the documents required by law. This term indicates a sense of possession: a certain language belongs to a certain group of people, and if a member of another community uses the language, he/she is perceived as committing an illegitimate act. And the same holds true, or so it seems, for cultural borders as well.

But are these not perceived borders? If a child, born to parents of

country A, grows up in country B, will the child not acquire the language (s) and customs of country B with the same proficiency and familiarity with children ethnically native to country B? If genetics has nothing to do with it, then what should prevent a person from country A from learning the language(s) and culture(s) of country B? It is still difficult for a great number of people to imagine that human beings are capable of being bilingual/bicultural or multilingual/multicultural. They believe, on no firm grounds, that if one starts one's life within a culture, one belongs to that culture exclusively and can on no account understand another one.

One belief common to many, regardless of their respective languages and cultures, is that literature written in a nation's 'own' language cannot be adequately translated or truly understood by speakers of another language. Even as recent as 2008, MIZUMURA Minae sang praise for what she considered uniquely Japanese in various stories, essays, and autobiographies written in Japanese:

... Those texts, transcending time, touch our hearts, us who can read Japanese.

What is more, those words and sentences are exactly the ones that cannot be translated.⁽¹⁹⁾

(translation mine)

Although Mizumura is perhaps right in claiming that the cultural aspects behind some Japanese literary works may prove recondite to certain readers who read the same works in translation, the fact that these readers are also human beings will probably allow them, if they try, to learn and understand those cultural traits. Language and culture, by definition,

are acquired, and not innate. To set rigid borders between them is to deny both the possibility and the fact that two or more languages and/or cultures can reside within one community or within one individual, and to deprive global citizens of the vast resources of linguistic and cultural heritage to which they are entitled.

Nihongo writers?

The term *Nihongo* literally means 'the language of Japan'; however, it has an unusual connotation. *Nihongo* denotes Japanese specifically when it is spoken or written by, or taught to, non-native Japanese speakers. In contrast, the term *kokugo*, or 'the national language', is reserved for native Japanese speakers (usually imagined to be Japanese nationals of Japanese parentage).

The same division exists in other East-Asian countries as well. I shall come back to the comparison shortly. I would first like to contrast the term *Nihongo* with the words 'English', '*français*', '*deutsch*', or '*español*'. (Other possibilities exist.) The latter words stay the same no matter who is speaking or writing them. In fact, the four languages are each spoken as an official language in more than five countries. It may logically follow that many speakers (I do not say native speakers) of any of these languages do not automatically associate that language with one single country or one single culture.

The notion of the 'national language' also exists in the Korean- and Chinese-speaking worlds. Korean for Koreans is called *guk-eo* (국어), the Korean pronunciation of the same Chinese characters as *kokugo* (國語). In Mainland China, Chinese as a school subject goes by the name of *yu³wen²* (语文), literally 'language and script'. In Taiwan, Chinese as a school subject is called *guo²wen²* (國文), or 'national script' ('script' is

sometimes used to denote 'language' in Chinese). In contrast, in the Mongolian People's Republic, Mongolian as a school subject is called Монгол хэл (Mongol khel), literally 'Mongolian language'. Although like the other three countries, Mongolia is also situated in East Asia, and although Mongolian is generally considered a linguistic relation to Japanese and Korean, the concept of 'the national language' does not seem to prevail in Mongolia.

The idea of *kokugo* has not always been there. One scholar generally associated with the concept is UEDA Kazutoshi (1867–1937), who maintained that Japan was of 'one nation, one race, and one language', and that this characteristic was an advantage for the modernisation of the country.⁽²⁰⁾ At the time, the concept was mainly exploited to restrict the use of Japanese dialects and homogenise Japan linguistically. In the contemporary context where *kokugo* is contrasted with *Nihongo*, the idea also implies that an unclosable gap exists between a language spoken by native speakers of a certain country (or certain countries) and the same language spoken by people from other linguistic communities. In other words, *Nihongo* will always remain *Nihongo*, the language of the outsiders, whereas *kokugo* has absolute authority.

It is noteworthy that The Society for Japanese Linguistics, founded in 1944 and the largest of its kind in Japan, changed its (original) Japanese name from *Kokugo Gakkai* to *Nihongo Gakkai* in January 2004. The first president of the Society, MAEDA Tomiyoshi, gave the reasons for this change in his explanatory note published on the Society's Website:

When the Society was founded, it was initially intended to bring together only researchers within Japan. However, as more and more research in the Japanese language is conducted overseas, the Society

is now expected to play the role of the centre of research in Japanese linguistics. Moreover, whereas the Society had not quite 500 members at the outset, today we count more than 2,400, of whom many are foreign researchers.⁽²¹⁾

(translation mine)

Although the reasons given do not necessarily suggest that the *kokugo* (Japanese for the Japanese)/*Nihongo* (Japanese for foreigners) divide has been blurred, it does seem that the notion of Japanese as the national language of Japan is giving way to a more cosmopolitan view of the language.

All in all, because of the overtones the word *Nihongo* has, the term 'Nihongo writers' may imply absolute ownerships of languages, as well as inferiority and improficiency on these non-native writers' part, and therefore may not describe these writers accurately.

Non-native-speaking Japanese-language writers?

This term is in fact the English version of '*Nihongo sakka* (writers)' in Japanese, since *Nihongo*, as discussed above, connotes 'Japanese as a non-native language'. It may seem to be a term that cuts to the core of the issue at hand: these writers are indeed without exception non-native speakers of Japanese. At first sight, this may seem a reasonable label, as it is, at least, accurate. However, to decide whether it is a suitable term, we still need to explore the connotations of the word 'non-native' as well as the politics between the native/non-native divide.

The assumptions behind the *kokugo/Nihongo* divide discussed in the last section are by no means unique to Japan. The same assumptions exist elsewhere as well. In the English-speaking context, discussions in

the native/non-native divide have proved relevant and necessary, as the large groups of English-speaking citizens of former British colonies and of unincorporated territories of the United States, among other groups, are often excluded from the 'native English speaker' club.

What are the ideologies behind the native/non-native divide? Let us look at the three language ideologies of 'native speaker' proposed by Alastair Pennycook in *The Cultural Politics of English as in International Language* (1994), restated by Neriko Musha Doerr (2009):

The first ideology that the concept of the "native speaker" supports is the belief that there is a close correspondence between holding the citizenship of a nation-state and being a native speaker of the national language of that nation-state.

The second ideology is the notion that language is a homogeneous and fixed system with a homogeneous speech community, which allows "a rigid and clear distinction between being a native speaker and not being so".

The third ideology is the idea that being a "native speaker" automatically bestows one with a high level of competence in all domains of one's first language, implying that the "native speaker" has "a complete and possibly innate competence in the language".⁽²²⁾

When we consider these ideologies, it will not be difficult to see that they not only create linguistic communities with exclusive memberships, but also associate this linguistic inclusion/exclusion with political and social inclusion/exclusion. Doerr quotes J. T. Irvine and Susan Gal (2000)'s

term 'fractal recursivity' to indicate the projection of social hierarchy onto a 'linguistic community', resulting in producing a seemingly corresponding but imaginary linguistic hierarchy.⁽²³⁾ Furthermore, the second ideology goes hand in hand with Irvine and Gal's model of 'erasure':

Though erasure, language ideology renders invisible some persons or activities that are inconsistent with the ideological scheme by making them go unnoticed, by transforming them to match the scheme, and/or by explaining them away. Here, what was erased was the diversity and dynamic nature of language as well as diverse linguistic practices of people who are considered as forming a "speech community."⁽²⁴⁾

Individuals like foreign-born writers of Japanese are exactly the people that are inconsistent with the ideology of homogeneity within a 'speech community'. They both 'disturb' the supposed homogeneity of the 'Japanese-speaking community' and the supposed homogeneity of the 'linguistic communities' they were born into. They are the persons that have to be explained away. I shall discuss the matter further in relation to the frequently asked question 'Why do they write in Japanese?'.

In conclusion, although 'non-native' in the conventional sense of the word does describe one trait of foreign-born writers of Japanese, we should be concerned if that label begins to have social and political implications. The word should perhaps not be used until it does not in the least hint at these writers' linguistic and/or social membership, or the literary merit of their works.

Foreign-born Writers of Japanese?

In the present paper, I have chosen to use the term 'foreign-born writers of Japanese' to denote the writers I am discussing, because this term, in my opinion, does not allude to the writers' racial or linguistic backgrounds, and therefore does not suggest clear-cut racial or linguistic boundaries. It does indicate the geographical backgrounds of the writers, but I believe individuals may have vastly different linguistic and cultural experiences even if they live in the same place. In other words, residents of countries other than Japan can still possess, at least to a certain extent, Japanese linguistic and cultural experiences. For instance, David Zoppetti and Boyanhishig both studied Japanese at university at the undergraduate level before coming to Japan.

Although I have used the term 'foreign-born writers of Japanese' in this paper for the sake of convenience, I do not consider it perfect. 'Foreign-born writers of Japanese' would also include foreign-born writers of Japanese parentage who write in Japanese. The existing writers that fit into this category all speak Japanese as their predominant language, or at least as one of their predominant languages. (In other words, writers of Japanese descent who have not grown up speaking Japanese and who are writing in Japanese have not emerged yet.) Although these foreign-born writers of Japanese descent may bring transcultural contributions to Japanese literature, they are not the object of our discussion here, and for that reason, the term 'foreign-born writers of Japanese' may cause some confusion. We may need either to find a more appropriate term in the future, or to give up categorising these writers altogether.

The Validity of the Question ‘Why Do These Writers Write in a Language Other than Their “Own”?’

Personally, I do not consider this question a natural one—or a legitimate one, for that matter—to ask, as it seems to imply to write in a language acquired later in life is a deviant act. However, since foreign-born writers of Japanese (as well as writers elsewhere who do not write in their respective native languages) are frequently asked this question, I will explore the possible answers to it.

Two main reasons come to mind as to why these writers write in a language considered not their ‘own’. The first is that they are proficient in whatever language they choose to write in; the second is the target audiences are different in different languages, and that these writers want to convey certain messages or images to a certain group of readers.

Native Speaker vs. Proficient Speaker

It is inappropriate to assume that ‘native’ equals proficient, and that ‘non-native’ spells non-proficient. Although these equations are true in many cases, they are not intrinsically interrelated, and prove false in other cases, though perhaps relatively small in number. The aforementioned TAWADA Yoko, who writes in both Japanese and German, poses the following rhetorical question in a speech delivered in Kyoto in 2009: ‘Is it not simply an assumption that one feels restricted and cannot write freely in a non-native language, and that one can write as one pleases when it comes to one’s mother tongue?’⁽²⁵⁾ Shirin Nezamzami has also referred to the facility she feels when writing in Japanese: ‘I have spent a long time in Japan, and people around me speak Japanese, and the lan-

guage of the media here is Japanese, so there are times when I feel it is easier to write in Japanese.'⁽²⁶⁾ At a 2010 symposium devoted to foreign-born writers of Japanese, Boyanhishig gave 'reading a lot of Japanese poetry rather than doing research' for his master's degree as one reason he began to write poetry in Japanese himself. He then said, 'Japan for me is the Japanese language.'⁽²⁷⁾ We must acknowledge the fact that these foreign-born writers of Japanese are, or were, long-time residents of Japan. They have heard, spoken, read, and written Japanese for so long that the language has become an integrated part of them, and the use of the language has become automated to a large degree. It would be both erroneous and misleading to suggest that their Japanese is infantile and that they are not, and will never be, at ease with the language.

In an article discussing the native speaker vs. the proficient speaker, Salikoko S. Mufwene reminds us of the ambiguous borderline between the two:

Native speakers need not be proficient in all varieties of their language; nor need they remain proficient during their lifetime in the variety they acquired as a mother, or native, tongue.⁽²⁸⁾

Mufwene also provides one possible reason for the non-acceptance of non-native proficient speakers, a mechanism similar to the abovementioned process which Irvine and Gal have named 'erasure':

As for why non-native proficient speakers are not taken into account in communities with native-speaker majorities, it is because they fall in the minority and the category of exceptions. Most non-native speakers do have an accent which is associated with features

not accepted or marginalized by the established, native members of such communities.

While there are several communities where proficiency in the local vernacular is typically associated with being a native speaker (assumed not to have an accent), there are also several others where proficiency is determined by greater experience with the variety and its use on regular basis.⁽²⁹⁾

Foreign-born writers of Japanese are people who fall in the minority from a linguistic point of view, and when they do not fit into the majority's expectations, they are asked why they are performing an act which many perceive as linguistically unlikely. However, as Mufwene points out, proficiency in a language can be 'determined by greater experience with the variety and its use on regular basis'. The writers in question fulfil these criteria as users of Japanese, and their proficiency should not be dismissed solely on the grounds that they are not native speakers of the language.

Task-Specific Language, Language-specified tasks

It might be revealing to consider why writers of a non-native language are often asked the question: 'Why do you write in that language?' instead of the question perhaps more frequently asked of writers: 'Why do you write?' It seems that the language they have chosen to write in overrides the fact that they are literary persons. The first question comes, again, from the groundless assumption that 'linguistic and cultural communities' are homogenous, from the false belief that a foreigner is a foreigner and foreigners are all the same. I would like to point out that

foreign-born writers of Japanese are writers first, Japanese-language writers second, and not the other way round.

It is a too-often overlooked fact that these writers had been literary persons even before they began writing in Japanese. Regardless of one's language(s), culture(s), or nationality(-ies), human beings are diversely disposed, and develop interest in, and choose, different occupations. Some become pilots, others become scientists or athletes or chefs, and yet others become writers. Reading and writing are acts that most writers continue performing no matter which language they live in. I would like to draw attention to the fact that LEVY Hideo, David Zoppetti, Boyan-hishig, and TIAN Yuan all hold degrees in Japanese literature, varying from Bachelor's to PhD. It should not be a difficult task to imagine that, at least during a prolonged period of time, they read Japanese literature both intensively and extensively, thus creating a vast amount of input of literary Japanese. It should then not seem unnatural that they began to write fiction or poetry in Japanese.

I have no proof that the foreign-born writers of Japanese discussed in this paper are proficient in Japanese in all areas of professional and private situations and on all topics from the weather to quantum theory. Nor do they need to be. In fact, native speakers or not, not many are. Another widespread myth about language is homogenous linguistic proficiency in a native speaker in all areas of life where the language is used. The truth is that our proficiency depends on the task in question. As for bilingual/multilingual persons, a specific task may correspond to a specific language. Alan Davies, in *The Native Speaker: Myth and Reality* (2003), discusses the matter in depth:

... there are tasks which have such specificity that they can only be

carried out in one language—reading a favourite newspaper is one and, for most people, talking to or listening to one's grandparents is another. There are in most people's lives activities that are quite specific to one language and would be unthinkable in another. This is one reason why in a very different context it is so difficult for language policy changes to be fully implemented, for, let us say, lecturers in Indian universities to switch completely from English to the regional language or in Tanzania for secondary school teachers to switch from English to Kiswahili. Their problem is that they have learned to do what they do, to carry out their professional life, in one language and it would involve a whole relearning for them to switch to another code.⁽³⁰⁾

A monolingual person, for instance, may never need to perform certain tasks, and therefore never develop the vocabulary, phrases and expressions included, for those tasks. The same holds true for a bilingual or multilingual person; however, as Davies points out, unlike the monolingual person, the tasks that the bilingual or multilingual person does perform may be executed in different languages, thus creating a linkage between a specific task and a specific language. These language-specified tasks may overlap, i.e. when one is proficient at a task in two or more languages. Seen the other way, if a bilingual/multilingual person is not proficient at Task A in Language X, it does not necessarily follow that the person will not be proficient at Task B either in Language X.

I have no intention to declare the foreign-born writers of Japanese discussed here do not show any non-proficiency in their output of Japanese. However, that should not disqualify them from writing fiction or poetry in Japanese, as their life experiences in Japan are in Japanese, and some

of them are/were professional readers of Japanese literature, whereas others are most likely to be amateur readers of fiction and/or poetry written in Japanese. Even if some of these writers may demonstrate errors and flaws in their (especially oral) output of Japanese or imperfections in their comprehension of the language, their experiences are sufficient for them to associate Japanese with the written word. In other words, they are adequately proficient in Japanese for the task of writing fiction or poetry in the language.

Target Audiences in Different Languages

Another commonly overlooked fact is that when a writer chooses a certain language as his/her medium, he/she is addressing a specific audience, namely the speakers of that language, native or not, and this audience may to some extent possess similar knowledge and hold similar assumptions about certain matters. Therefore, in a way, all literature can be said to have a certain degree of audience-specificity. Although Nezamafi's debut novella *White Paper* featured only Iranian characters in it, the work may have been somewhat different had Nezamafi chosen to write it in Persian. She herself commented on this issue:

When I was writing *White Paper*, the reason I was describing Iranian country scenes in great detail was because I wanted to convey those images to Japanese readers. In that sense, I might have appropriated *White Paper* (I don't mean the theme) to the Japanese readership. I don't think what I want to write changes according to which language I write in, but the way I write a story may change. For example, if I write about Iran for Iranians, I may not give detailed descriptions of the scenery as I did in *White Paper*. Because

they would already know it.⁽³¹⁾

(translation mine)

Had Nezamafi written *White Paper* in Persian, the target audience would have been very different. There are certain explanations that the author would never have had to make, and subplots and images that would never have surprised most readers reading in Persian. Yang expressed the same idea:

If I write in Chinese, I think I will write about Japan as I know it, and introduce Japanese culture to Chinese readers as I understand it. [...] When I write in Japanese, I probably send out the message that I am examining what is Chinese in me after bringing it to Japan.⁽³²⁾

When a writer chooses the language in which to write, he/she has also chosen his/her readers, and the way he/she wants to address them. The aforementioned *Ichigen-san* by David Zoppetti is also obviously targeted at a Japanese readership. I do not mean that there is no universality in their works, but we have all seen footnotes on linguistic and/or cultural points in translated literary works, and the authors of *White Paper* and *Ichigen-san* have made such footnotes unnecessary by easing out the problem for the readers in the actual literary texts. That these writers are writing *in Japanese* is partially what makes their work significant.

All in all, I do not believe that the fact that these foreign-born writers are writing in Japanese in and of itself gives their works credit. On the other hand, their works should not be discounted either, simply on the grounds that they are writing in Japanese; nor should their writing in

Japanese be seen as a deviant act and scrutinised by the public.

That poets and writers who came to Japan as adults are writing in Japanese is a good sign for both Japanese literature and the Japanese society. Their emergence indicates that in Japan, just like in many other parts of the world, individuals and communities of different linguistic and cultural origins are inheriting the same linguistic and cultural legacies that belong to all humanity.

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Notes

- (1) In this paper, I shall use the 'surname first, given name second' name order with Chinese, Korean, and Japanese author/critic names if the authors/critics write in Chinese, Korean, and/or Japanese, and also with LEVY Hideo, who writes in Japanese and who puts his own (pen-)name in the above order. To avoid confusion, I shall capitalise the surnames in such cases. For those who write literary works or have published interviews or academic articles in English, I shall use the English name order (given name first, surname second) as given by the authors themselves, regardless of the ethnic origins of their names.
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- (3) LEVY Hideo, *Border-Crossing Voices* (リービ英雄:『越境の声』Iwanami Shoten, 2007) 55.
- (4) LEVY Hideo, *Henry Takeshi Levitzki's Summer Travels* (リービ英雄:『ヘンリーたけしレウィツキーの夏の紀行』Kodansha, 2002), back flap of dust jacket.
- (5) LEVY Hideo, *Fake Water* (リービ英雄:『仮の水』Kodansha, 2008) 140-1.
- (6) David Zoppetti, *Ichigen-san* (デビット・ゾペティ:『いちげんさん』Shueisha, 1997) 41-2.
- (7) David Zoppetti, *Ichigen-san* 120-2.
- (8) Kaho Shimizu, "Linguistic Chameleon": Novelist Finds a Voice in Japanese.' *Japan Times Online*, Sunday 28 October, 2001 (<http://search.japan-times.co.jp/cgi-bin/nn20011028b1.html>), accessed on 27 June 2010.
- (9) Paul Sminkey, Amazon customer review for *Ichigen-san*, November 2000 (http://www.amazon.co.jp/product-reviews/4087742431/ref=cm_cr_pr_

link_next_2?ie=UTF8&showViewpoints=0&pageNumber=2&sortBy=bySubmissionDateDescending), accessed on 27 June 2010.

- (10) Shimizu, "Linguistic Chameleon": Novelist Finds a Voice in Japanese.' Accessed on 27 June 2010.
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- (13) TSUJIHARA Noboru, 'Discerning the Differences' (Comments on the 105th Bungakukai Award for New Writers). (辻原登:「差異をみきわめる」(第105回文学界新人賞選評) *Bungakukai*, December Issue, 2007 (Bungei-Shunju) 21.
- (14) Comments on the 108th Bungakukai Award for New Writers (第108回文学界新人賞選評): KAKUTA Mitsuyo, 'Fighting Fiction' (角田光代:「小説との格闘」); MATSUURA Hisaki, 'Send in a Manuscript that Blows Me Away' (松浦寿輝:「うちのめされたいと思う」); MATSUURA Rieko, 'How Urgency is Expressed' (松浦理英子:「切実さの表われ方」); HANAMURA Mangetsu, 'Pretentious Japanese, Simple Japanese' (花村萬月:「小賢しい日本語, 愚直な日本語」). *Bungakukai*, June Issue, 2009, (Bungei-Shunju) 13, 15, 17, 18.
- (15) For instance, the phrase appears on pages 32 and 36 of *Bungakukai*, June Issue, 2009 (Bungei-Shunju), where *White Paper* was first published.
- (16) YANG Yi and Shirin Nezamafi, 'Why We Write in Japanese' (a dialogue). (楊逸×シリル・ネザマフィ:「わたしたちはなぜ日本語で書くのか」) *Bungakukai*, November Issue, 2009 (Bungei-Shunju) 203.
- (17) An interview with David Zoppetti (<http://www.geocities.co.jp/Bookend-Ohgai/2622/interview2.htm>), accessed on 12 June 2010.
- (18) Yang and Nezamafi, 'Why We Write in Japanese' (a dialogue). *Bungakukai* (November Issue, 2009) 201.
- (19) MIZUMURA Minae, *When Japanese Goes Extinct: Amidst the Century of English* (水村美苗:『日本語が亡びるとき——英語の世紀の中で』 Chi-

- kuma Shobo, 2008) 227.
- (20) YASUDA Toshiaki, *Toward the Extrication from Nihongo* (安田敏朗 : 『脱「日本語」への視座』 Sangensha, 2003).
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- (23) Doerr 19. Original source: Judith T. Irvine and Susan Gal, 'Language Ideology and Linguistic Differentiation'. Paul V. Kroskrity, ed., *Regimes of Language: Ideologies, Politics and Identities* (Santa Fe: School of American Research Press) 35-84.
- (24) Doerr 19.
- (25) As quoted in GUO Nanyan, 'Imagination and Creativity Nurtured by Japanese Language and Culture' [translation mine]. *Ecstasy and Agony: The Experiences of Non-Japanese Writers of Japanese Literature* [Symposium Proceedings; English title provided] (郭南燕 : 「日本語日本文化によって広がる想像力と創造性」『日本語で書く——文学創作の喜びと苦しみ(予稿集)』 Nichibunken, 29 January 2010) 44. Original source: *The Kyoto Shimbun*, 7 December 2009, p. 7.
- (26) Yang and Nezamafi, 'Why We Write in Japanese' (a dialogue). *Bungakukai* (November Issue, 2009) 198.
- (27) Boyanhishig at *Ecstasy and Agony: The Experiences of Non-Japanese Writers of Japanese Literature*, Symposium held at International Research Centre for Japanese Studies, Kyoto, Japan, on 29 January 2010.
- (28) Salikoko S. Mufwene. 'Native Speaker, Proficient Speaker and Norms'. Rajendra Singh, ed. *The Native Speaker: Multilingual Perspectives* (Udaya Narayana Singh and Probal Dasgupta, series eds. *Language and Development vol. 4*. New Delhi; Thousand Oaks; London: Sage Publica-

- tions, 1998) 111.
- (29) Mufwene 118.
- (30) Alan Davies. *The Native Speaker: Myth and Reality*. (Colin Baker and Nancy H. Hornberger, series eds. *Bilingual Education and Bilingualism* 38. Clevedon; Buffalo; Toronto; Sydney: Multilingual Matters Ltd. 2003) 79–80.
- (31) Yang and Nezamafi, 'Why We Write in Japanese' (a dialogue). *Bungakukai* (November Issue, 2009) 200–1.
- (32) Yang and Nezamafi, 'Why We Write in Japanese' (a dialogue). *Bungakukai* (November Issue, 2009) 200.