

## **Imagining the Japanese heritage learner: A scalar perspective**

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### **Abstract**

Heritage language learners (e.g., Montrul, 2013; Wiley et al. 2014) have recently received increased attention in SLA research. In keeping with this growing interest, this case study examines how multiple social and geographic scales (Canagarajah & De Costa, 2016) come together and contribute to how two transnational (Duff, 2015) Japanese heritage learners perceive themselves in relation to their multiple imagined communities (Anderson, 1983) on a local, translocal, and transnational scale. The focal participants for the case study are two Japanese heritage-language-speaking sisters, both who grew up in the Midwest United States. Findings suggest that the sisters' experiences both on a local and transnational scale shape their expectations of the community of Japanese speakers. While both sisters grew up in a relatively similar environment, individual characteristics coupled with their unique experiences led the sisters to encounter different ways of viewing themselves with relation to the different scales that they found themselves a part of. In particular, the sisters imagined the transnational Japanese-speaker community as more diverse and inclusive than their more traditional, non-transnational Japanese speaking counterparts. Additionally, how the sisters confronted and reacted to their experiences differed, based on their perceptions of themselves in relation to other Japanese speakers across different scales. The older sister, for example, was more active in confronting practices she disagreed with while the younger sister, who was equally frustrated at certain practices, did not actively try to counteract them because she did not want to stick out. Highlighted is the complex nature of heritage and transnational individuals' experiences and identity formation, and how the findings from this study can be used to inform heritage language learning instruction.

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### **Keywords**

Heritage language learner; scales; imagined communities; transnational

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## Introduction

In his conceptualization of imagined communities, Benedict Anderson (1983) conceived of imagined communities as those in which individuals conceive of having communion with, even though they may never actually meet. Since the early 1990s, second language acquisition (SLA) researchers have coopted this construct in order to “explore how learners’ affiliation with such communities might affect their learning trajectories” (Norton, 2013: 8). More recently, a growing number of SLA researchers (e.g., Manosuthikit & De Costa, 2016; Montrul, 2013; Wiley et al., 2014). have begun to investigate the complexities surrounding heritage language learning. Often, heritage learners and transnationals develop and maintain ties with their peers and family members across local, translocal and transnational contexts (Lam, 2009). To our knowledge, there has not been work examining heritage language learners’ *imagined communities* across these multiple contexts, in particular through the lens of social and geographic scales. This paper examines how multiple social and geographic scales come together and contribute to the ways in which two Japanese heritage learners perceive themselves in relation to their multiple imagined communities on a local, translocal, and transnational scale. We start with a brief review of transnationalism and heritage language learning before proceeding to explain how a scalar approach to language learning can enhance our understanding of heritage language acquisition in a contemporary era.

### 1. Framing the study

#### 1.1. Transnational linguistic repertoires: Issues of legitimation

Within applied linguistics, a major area of interest is the language learning related issues surrounding transnationalism. Transnationalism generally refers to the crossing of borders and the maintenance of identities, communication, and activities linking individuals with communities outside of those in which they currently reside (Vertovec, 2006). With increased international migration comes greater linguistic diversity and language contact. Thus, the identities of transnational language learners are often in a state of flux as they shuttle between communities as well as social and linguistic practices. Commenting on the effects of an increasingly global world, Duff (2015: 59) noted that “mobility may lead to the retention of prior languages primarily or the expansion of linguistic repertoires by learning new languages or other varieties of the languages they already know.” These linguistic repertoires, however, are valued differently, depending on their context of use. Relatedly, Flores and Rosa (2015) challenged the concept of linguistic appropriateness and its surrounding discourse, suggesting that this phenomenon inherently devalues the diverse and complex capital of individuals who are not deemed to have the ‘right’ type of capital. Consequently, Flores and Rosa call for a dismantling of the system that continues to racialize the language of those who do not constitute the *white listening subject*. Regardless of the race-centeredness of this term, we argue that the notion of those who do not constitute the white listening subject can be extended to apply to any group that experiences minoritization, marginalization, or oppression based on their linguistic practices or capital. To some effect, Flores and Rosa’s problematization of the white listening subject invites comparison to Blackledge’s (2003) earlier work that linked the notion of imagined communities

with the racialized discourses in the UK; these discourses, as noted by Blackledge, stigmatized the cultural practices of Asian minorities who visited their heritage countries regularly, thereby highlighting the challenges encountered by heritage language learners.

## **1.2. Heritage language learners (HLLs) and the Japanese HLL experience**

The emergence of an increasingly transnational world, as previously described, has also given rise to linguistic challenges faced by heritage language learners (HLLs). For this paper, we adopt the view that heritage language learners include individuals whose primary language is not the one regularly spoken in the home. As observed by Montrul (2013), a majority of the HLL studies have investigated individuals with low language ability. To extend the HLL research agenda, Montrul also called for an exploration of the opposite end of the ability spectrum, that is, an emphasis on the native-like abilities of HLLs that have been largely overlooked by the field. One way to enhance our understanding of the HLL experience, according to Melo-Pfeifer (2015), is to examine the role that families can play in the construction of expectations for HL maintenance and how to integrate them with language pedagogy. Indeed, a number of sociolinguistically-oriented SLA researchers (e.g., King, 2013) have begun to examine language policies as enacted within transcultural families. King (2013), for example, investigated how three sisters in an Ecuadorian family that immigrated to the United States constructed and performed their HLL identities within a family setting, thereby highlighting the important role that families play in influencing language development. Building on this body of HLL research, this study examines the experiences of two Japanese HLLs. As will be demonstrated, the conceptions of an imagined Japanese identity as conceived by our two focal HLL learners were different from what other Japanese speakers expected. For this paper, and building on earlier family-based HLL work, we examine how HLLs construct and project their identities onto multiple *imagined communities* (Anderson, 1983) and across multiple *scales* (Blommaert, 2007; Canagarajah & De Costa, 2016).

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To date, much of the family-based work involving HLLs has focused on their literacy development and reclamation of their ethnolinguistic identities. Hashimoto and Lee (2011), for example, explored the Japanese literacy practices of three Japanese families in a predominantly Anglo and Latino community in the United States, where other Japanese interlocutors were uncommon. Although their participants differed in their practices, Hashimoto and Lee reported that their focal children's engagement in Japanese literacy greatly improved when the families emphasized the communicative aspects of learning Japanese as opposed to focusing on reading and writing activities.

In regards to the construction and maintenance of Japanese bilingual identities, a few studies have focused on the experiences of emerging adolescents and the struggles and changes they go through. In her work with multiple Japanese *kikokushijo* ("sojourner children" or "returnees"), Kanno (2003) observed that as the adolescents matured, their ability to understand and negotiate their conflicting identities and social expectations also developed. She concluded that the individuals grew more adept at achieving a balance between the two worlds that they found themselves a part of. These bilingual individuals, according to Kanno, also found a way to cope with shuttling between two distinct languages and cultures. In a related study, Kamada (2010) explored the experiences of biracial Japanese adolescent girls living in Japan and how they struggled with their mixed ethnicities. Kamada reported that (a) her participants' hybrid identities

were not monolithic and unchanging but were constructed through a difficult process of struggle and diligent effort, and (b) their identities shifted and changed in accordance with the context in which they found themselves.

Thus far, the bulk of the work focusing on Japanese HLLs has focused on the dynamic nature of identity construction that evolved as these individuals traversed physical and cultural borders. To help us better understand how HLLs perceive their identities across space and social spheres, we turn to the construct of *scales* and *imagined communities*, which are described next.

### **1.3. A scalar and imagined communities-based approach to heritage language learning**

Scales can take the form of timescales (e.g., days, months, years) or be arranged according to nested social contexts (e.g., interpersonal, classroom, school, community, national, transnational). Emphasizing the spatiotemporal aspects of scales De Costa (2016), who examined the experiences of a transnational Vietnamese scholarship student in Singapore, illustrated how her learning outcomes were affected by the ways in which she was discursively positioned by her peers and teachers. Working within a U.S. context, Wortham and Rhodes (2013) examined how different timescales (e.g., local developments over a decade vs. the larger historical narrative of U.S. immigration) came together harmoniously for their participant, Allie, who lived in a community with a large Latino population. These circumstances combined to help construct Allie’s identity as a good reader.

In their introduction to a special issue of *Linguistics and Education* that focused on scalar approaches to language learning and teaching, Canagarajah and De Costa (2016) advocated that scales be adopted as a category of practice. This power-inflected notion, they contend, enables researchers to view scale as a verb which provides additional constructs such as scale jumping and differentiation. They emphasize the agency of individuals who are not constricted within a given time and space. In other words, individuals are not necessarily bound by a power hierarchy. Instead, they are able to inhabit more than one space at any given time because of affordances such as technology, thereby enabling them to jump scales and engage in differentiation. Transnational HLLs, in particular, are able to communicate with family and friends in different parts of the world and also visit them as a result of travel. Such affordances, in turn, allow transnational HLLs to envision themselves as being members of more than one imagined community because, often, these students straddle several communities as they crisscross the globe both virtually and in person.

Relatedly, and of particular importance to this study is the notion of *upscaling*, as conceived by Blommaert (2007). According to Blommaert, this practice of upscaling can be utilized as a form of expressing power because in certain contexts, individuals may invoke a higher scale that is inaccessible to another individual who lacks the ‘right’, legitimized capital (Bourdieu, 1991). Such an act of upscaling is therefore an overt attempt to demarcate an individual’s distinction. In the opposite direction, individuals can also *downscale* by switching to a lingua franca language to establish solidarity with their interlocutors. Thus, downscaling indicates a more positive connection with an interlocutor, and the refusal to do so (upscaling) is suggestive of an unwillingness to legitimize another speaker and her language or language variety. As will be discussed later, a Japanese speaker’s refusal to respond in Japanese, but instead use English (or another language) when speaking to non-Japanese individuals would exemplify an upscaling act.

Put differently, this practice, when viewed from a scalar perspective, can indicate a move to delegitimize the Japanese skills of their interlocutor in and through an exercise of power. In this paper, we apply the notion of upscaling and downscaling as well as the view that moving across scale levels (e.g., local, transnational) can indicate familiarity, closeness or connection. We also illustrate how these scaled relations are contextually embedded and unique.

As discussed previously, we use the lens of scales to examine HLLs' imagined communities. Anderson (1983) originally conceived of imagined communities in connection with nation states. Like Norton (2016: 477), however, we adopt an extended view of imagined communities to cover "any community of the imagination that is desirable to the language learner." In SLA research, the notion of *imagined communities* has often been examined in terms of identity and investment in the language learning process (Norton, 2001). The analysis of language learner identity is apt, as oftentimes it is through the imagined community of language speakers that learners and speakers draw and mobilize their *investment* in learning a given language (Kanno & Norton, 2003). These imagined communities may not actually exist in the ways that learners conceptualize them, yet they continue to have a very real and important impact not only on learner trajectories and their life choices, but also those of family members (Dagenais, 2003; Song, 2012) and peers (Lam, 2009). Put differently, the language development of transnational HLLs is shaped by the multiple scales in which they are embedded and by the imagined communities to which they aspire to gain membership. On the local scale, HLLs may conceive of an imagined community of speakers in the surrounding city and local institutions. On the translocal scale, HLLs may conceive of an imagined community of other transnationals living within the same national borders. The transnational scale would then include the imagined community of speakers globally or those of the same ethnic heritage. In short, scales provide an efficient lens with which to examine the multiple imagined communities HLLs construct as they move across multiple contexts. Building on these recent theoretical developments associated with transnationalism, heritage learning and scales, this present study is guided by the following research questions:

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1. How do the multiple scales at play within the lives of our focal HLLs, Claire and Erika, come together to affect their identity construction?
2. In what ways are their identities constructed differently?
3. How do they perceive and relate to different imagined communities across different scales?

## **2. Methodology**

### **2.1. Context**

Our study took place in Fall 2015. Both participants, who are sisters, were born in the United States and have spent most of their lives in a suburb of a large metro area in Michigan. Within their hometown, individuals identifying as of Japanese race make up just over 3.5% of the total population of 55,000 (census.gov). This community has been referred to as the state's *Little Tokyo* by the consulate general, and has a long history of harboring Japanese families that come to the United States for a short period on business assignments. These facts may play a role in Claire's and Erika's (pseudonyms) experiences as they were growing up. While the Japanese

residents in their hometown are still definitely an ethnic minority within their home community, their disproportionately larger numbers here may have played a role in Claire’s and Erika’s social experiences. Additionally, their hometown has a relatively higher percentage of college graduates (59% compared to Michigan state average of 26%) and a higher median household income. All of these factors combine to afford Claire and Erika a relatively higher amount of what Bourdieu (1991) terms *economic* and *social* capital within the community they were raised in, as others there have had ample exposure and interactions with those of Japanese ethnicity. In addition, their hometown has a weekend Japanese complementary school for Japanese students whose families are here in the United States for a short period and for those families who want their children to receive an education in the Japanese language.

## 2.2. Participants

Author 1 met both focal participants through his graduate assistantship duties. He met the older sister, Erika, first during his first year of PhD work. It was through this work relationship that he first had discussions with her about her unique HLL situation. He initially approached only her as she was about to leave the United States to live and work in Japan as a Japanese HLL with a sound command of the language. It was not until the second year of his PhD study that he learned that Erika’s younger sister, Claire, had begun studying at the same university where this study is situated. Through his interactions and discussions with both sisters, it became clear that their situation was unique due to their experiences living in the United States while still returning regularly to Japan during breaks and holidays. As mentioned, both Erika and Claire grew up in the United States, although they had consistent exposure to Japan, Japanese living, and even some of the education system. Their parents, who are both Japanese and originally from Okinawa, came to the United States as adults. Their family regularly visited Japan each year, often spending an extended amount of time in Okinawa during the summer. Travel outside of Okinawa for the participants had been limited for their family, although Erika had spent more time travelling to other parts of Japan.

The sisters were enrolled in a Japanese complementary school while attending grade school, although Claire hated attending and rebelled to the point that her parents eventually allowed her to quit. Erika indicated that she did not enjoy it either, but did not put up such a fight with her parents. With regards to their Japanese language ability, Erika reported that their mother was ‘satisfied’ with their proficiency. Both sisters expressed that they were much more comfortable speaking Japanese than they were reading it, and both disclosed a desire to someday become more proficient writers and readers. Japanese, according to Claire and Erika, is also the language that is spoken most in the home, although the siblings often codeswitch between Japanese and English.

At the time of this writing, Erika was a 22-year-old electrical engineering major with a concentration in Biomedical Engineering. As noted, she planned to move to Japan to pursue her career upon graduation. In March 2016, Erika joined an engineering firm near Tokyo, a job that she said she landed from her involvement with the Boston Career Forum – an event that she became aware of through the Japanese student group on campus. Through conversations with her, it became clear that she enjoyed reading literature, but did not often read Japanese literature due to the difficulty of reading Japanese characters. When asked about her Japanese language ability, she readily admitted that it was not where she thought it could be, but that further language

instruction in a formal setting was something that would be as she put it, “a waste of time” (Interview, October 28, 2015). Interviews and further interactions with Erika revealed that she did not think that formal instruction would provide her with the kind of practice and instruction that would be beneficial for her Japanese language use. When asked why this might be, she noted that practice and instruction was ‘a waste of time’ because she already knew the language.

Claire was an 18-year-old media and information major, and she wants to focus on computer graphics, design and programming. She has become a regular part of the Japanese student club on campus, and at the time of this writing was working towards becoming a member of the executive board of the group. She is very interested in Japanese pop-culture and media, and is often observed reading popular Manga (Japanese comics) or watching Japanese variety television shows. When asked about her involvement with the Japanese club, she responded that she was interested in the group because she wants the opportunity to practice her Japanese and to also broaden her network of friends. While not an anxious language learner, Claire, became increasingly aware of how people position her and how she attempts to resist certain categorizations of herself. An issue that has come up is that of her *Okinawan* accent (as mentioned, her parents were originally from Okinawa), which to her was a surprise, since she had always just assumed that she had an American accent.

### **2.3. Data Collection and Analysis**

As stated, this case study seeks to shed light on the heritage language learner experiences of Claire and Erika. Of specific interest is how their identities in relation to imagined communities across scales were discursively constructed primarily through written narratives and face-to-face interactions between the two sisters and Author 1.

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Data collection occurred throughout the course of one semester (Fall 2015). Approximately, five hours of interviews (both individual and group) were recorded and transcribed. In addition, multiple journal entries and personal correspondence via email were combined for analysis in which the data were continually re-examined and compared in a constant-comparative approach (Fram, 2013). This was done in order to identify emergent themes from the data. Once a recurrent theme was identified, the data were revisited to find additional examples to provide support. This process was repeated for each theme.

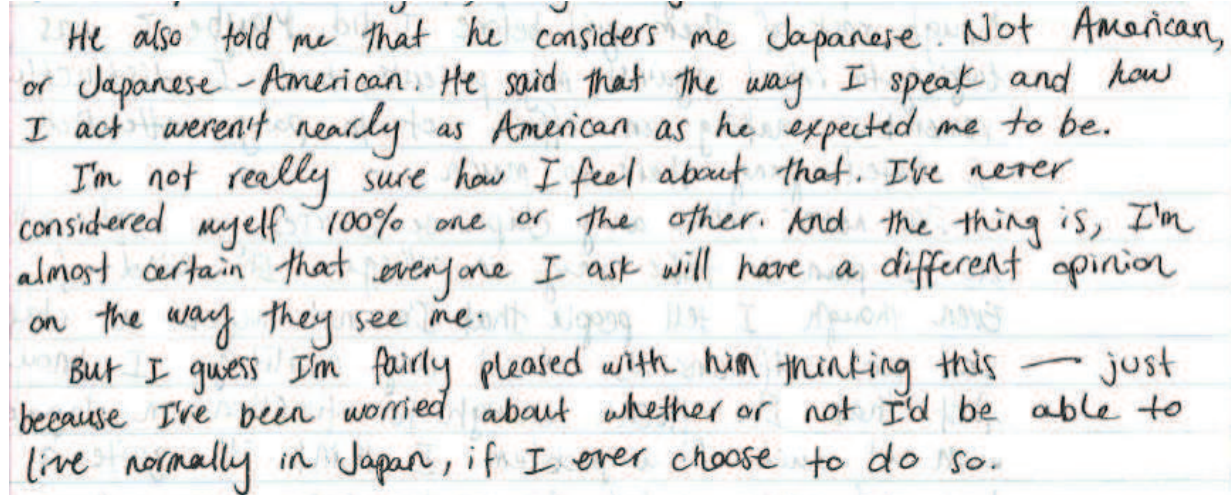
## **3. Findings**

### **3.1. Blending in and being Japanese**

In Claire’s first journal entry (Figure 1), she outlines how a friend in the Japan club on campus told her that he viewed her as being Japanese, not American or even Japanese-American. She expresses how she is unsure about this because of how she has felt that she is not Japanese or American. In further interactions with Claire and Erika, it became clearer that the Japanese international students view Claire as being more Japanese than American because of her mannerisms and understanding of Japanese cultural norms and culture. On the local scale, and as demonstrated in Figure 1) it appears that Claire has been acknowledged as being closer to the

Japanese international students in terms of *Japaneseness* than other HLLs, and even her own older sister.

**Figure 1. Claire: He told me he considers me Japanese. Not American or Japanese-American**



He also told me that he considers me Japanese. Not American, or Japanese-American. He said that the way I speak and how I act weren't nearly as American as he expected me to be. I'm not really sure how I feel about that. I've never considered myself 100% one or the other. And the thing is, I'm almost certain that everyone I ask will have a different opinion on the way they see me. But I guess I'm fairly pleased with him thinking this — just because I've been worried about whether or not I'd be able to live normally in Japan, if I ever choose to do so.

What is also interesting is how Claire recognizes that other people will view her differently; however, this recognition on the local scale does not stop her from feeling some satisfaction and taking it as a confirmation to her that on a transnational scale she would not have many issues if she decided to go to Japan. In the interview following this entry (Excerpt 1), Claire (C), however, expresses to Author 1 (J) that she would prefer to be viewed more as a Japanese-American, because as she puts it, “that is what I am” (line 3). At the same time, Claire seems to place value on being able to “blend in more” (line 7) and being viewed as Japanese by at least one friend locally is something that appears to have boosted her confidence to survive in the transnational context of Japan.

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**Excerpt 1. Claire: I would rather have them view me as Japanese American**

- J: Mhm and then so how do you feel about how they view you ?  
 C: I mean I would rather have them view me as like Japanese American because that's what I am uhm like a good mixture of both but I don't I don't really know how I feel about that because it I guess its kinda nice to like like to know that they could view me as Japanese then if I potentially do go and live in japan for a bit then uhm I don't know I would feel a little bit more confident that I would be able to like like I don't... blend in more with like the Japanese community and stuff not stick out so much  
 J: Mhm  
 10 C: so I guess that's kinda nice but Id rather have them view me as both

By contrast, Erika (E) has had more experience visiting Japan, and she has had first-hand opportunities to be recognized by Japanese people as not being out of the ordinary in more transnational contexts and experiences. In Excerpt 2, Erika responds to the question of whether she thinks her language ability has played a role in how she is treated when visiting Japan. Interestingly, she prefaces how she is treated by informing J how “obvious foreigners” (line 2) are treated to enable contrast to her own personal experiences. She claims that she is treated “just



like a normal Japanese person” (line 4) but also indicates that sometimes she is asked if she is part Japanese, which would indicate that they somehow discover that she is not “normal Japanese.” Erika then expresses the reasons for this as being more likely from her ability to speak English well or how she dresses (lines 9 -12), however. Also noteworthy is the use of the term “foreigner” to indicate someone that is non-Japanese. Through the use of this term, Erika indexes herself as someone other than a foreigner in the transnational context of Japan.

**Excerpt 2. Erika: Obvious foreigners**

- E: Oh yeah, like usually when I go to Japan I mean like when foreigners go to Japan like they're obvious foreigners like they're spoken to in broken English and given an English menu- They do like speak to me in Japanese so like in Tokyo, Okinawa I'm treated like just a normal Japanese person but uhm maybe  
5 more so here or when I am talking to people like like you know it's not just like a waiter a waitress or a waiter like somebody I'm actually talking to as a person you know sometimes they'll ask like oh are you like part Japanese things like that
- J: mhm do you know why they ask you those questions or is it just...
- E: I think its just like uhm I guess the fact that I can speak English and I speak it  
10 well uhm maybe like a little bit of like the way I dress because like the fashion like its different and like you can tell by how a person like chooses what they wear that they're maybe not from around there

While both sisters and those with whom they socialize outside of their family readily recognize Erika's abilities to speak Japanese to be superior, Claire more closely resembled what a friend described as someone who is “Japanese on the inside.” Erika, on the other hand, is viewed as being more American since her mannerisms and way of speaking tend to be much more direct. Erika herself identified the fact that she tends not to adopt Japanese interactional patterns, and recognized that other people have expressed that she is a *Dokuzetsu* (毒舌) or “poison tongue”. Typically, this means that others view her as being overly direct or even using abusive language. Erika also differs in how she thinks about or conceptualizes being ‘Japanese’ or ‘American’. In Figure 2 she explains in her journal entry that being Japanese is a “more self-determined thing”. For Erika, it appears that being a transnational Japanese HLL allows her the option of being either American or Japanese. This set of options, however, is not available to someone who is not of Japanese ancestry.

**Figure 2. Erika: A more self-determined thing**

I think this is mostly a self determined thing. The important thing is that you identify with what you believe are Japanese values. \* However, I think it would be difficult for a non-Japanese (ethnically) to feel Japanese in Japan. First, ~~such~~ such a person may stand out and be stared at, which can really wear you down. People may purposefully not speak to you, or only speak to you in English, at least at first. A sense of "othered" would pervade.

\* although language important too

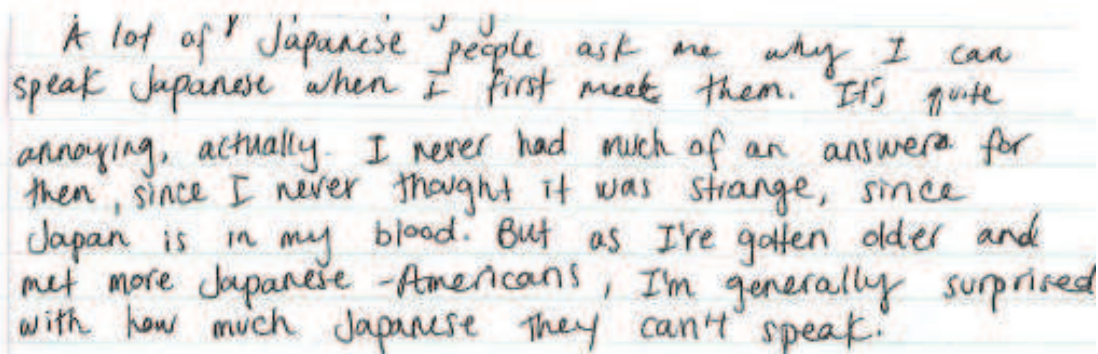
Thus, from the experiences of the two sisters, it appears that on a local scale (e.g., local community and organizations) with other Japanese HLLs and transnationals, *Japaneseness* is seen as more grounded in cultural understanding and norms. However, on the transnational scale (e.g., in Japan) there is not as much emphasis placed on *Japaneseness* in the same way since there is not enough opportunity for interaction and evaluation of interlocutors. This fact may lead to the different experiences of Erika and Claire – Claire being considered more Japanese on the local scale and Erika less so, and vice versa on the transnational scale, as Erika is a more proficient speaker and has less of an American accent.

### 3.2. Language abilities and ‘being Japanese’

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For Claire and Erika, being proficient in both Japanese and English seems to have influenced their conceptions of the translocal imagined community of Japanese HL learners. Both sisters note that it was normal for them to be proficient in Japanese, which is something that they have discovered is not universally the case for others of Japanese descent living in the United States. Verschueren (2012) observes that ideologies may not be questioned by different community members, which seems to be the case for Claire and Erika. As is seen from Claire’s journal excerpt (Figure 3), many of their Japanese counterparts are surprised by the fact that they speak Japanese so well, going so far as to ask them why that is the case. In the same journal entry, Claire outlines how the fact that she is a proficient speaker has led to some disruption of her conception of an imagined translocal community of Japanese heritage learners. As stated in the final sentence, she is surprised at how only a few of them could speak Japanese.

**Figure 3. Claire: Japan is in my blood**



A lot of Japanese people ask me why I can speak Japanese when I first meet them. It's quite annoying, actually. I never had much of an answer for them, since I never thought it was strange, since Japan is in my blood. But as I've gotten older and met more Japanese-Americans, I'm generally surprised with how much Japanese they can't speak.

Here, and through the interviews and interactions that Author 1 had had with her, it became clear that Claire's unique experiences with going to Japanese school, her parents' insistence on maintaining Japanese, and her frequent visits to Japan have affected her views and expectations for what the experience of being a person of Japanese descent entails. These experiences, coupled with growing up as a HLL in the United States, appear to have helped her construct an imagined community of Japanese HLLs on a translocal scale that have had similar experiences of attending Japanese schools and maintaining a certain level of language ability.

In a joint interview captured in Excerpt 5, Claire narrates how her close friend, Kai, experienced 'othering' by her Japanese interlocutors in the form of their implicit refusal to respond to her in Japanese because she is bi-racial, even though, as Claire identifies, her Japanese is "I think ... like better" than her own. Nevertheless, Kai had to negotiate the frustrating experience of not having her Japanese legitimized since she is biracial. Erika adds how she attempted to resist this practice by voicing her views since she is a part of the executive board of the Japan club, stating that she told the members of the board, "it's just rude". Interestingly, Erika attempts to frame the problem as occurring on a more local and interpersonal scale, stating that "it might have just been the guys." Claire, however, immediately moves to refute this notion by adding how Kai's experiences go beyond the local scale of the Japan club, in that when visiting Japan the same pattern continues. On the transnational scale (i.e., visiting Japan), at least in Claire's statements of her view, this practice is common – even normalized – for Japanese people. As noted, "... a lot of Japanese people just assume that like...if you look foreign then you like don't speak Japanese." Deliberate attempts to exclude a biracial Japanese speaker like Kai on the basis of her physical appearance can be seen as an *upscaling* act (Blommaert, 2007) on the part of her Japanese interlocutors. We consider this *upscaling* as more than just distancing others, as it may also be a display of power that de-legitimizes the Japanese that others speak, regardless of actual language ability. This may occur as Japanese speakers seek to index a sense of distinction instead of establishing solidarity with Kai. In the other direction, choosing to engage with interlocutors in Japanese could possibly be seen as a *downscaling* act, in which the *Japaneseness* of the other may be legitimized by engaging in the language. Importantly, Erika condemns this framing of Kai's experiences by affirming Claire's observation, stating how she thinks it's "really bad" how people in Japan behave towards people that do not fit within their stereotype of what a Japanese speaker looks like.

**Excerpt 5. Refusal to engage in Japanese**

- C: My friend Kai she goes here too she's really tall and she's uhm half-black half-Japanese so she stands out quite a bit and I think she's like better at Japanese than I am like her mom's a Japanese teacher and she - she's like learned Japanese from like a really young age so she's pretty good at Japanese but like no (*laughs*) matter
- 5        how many times she like tries to talk to somebody in Japanese they always talk back to her in English it like really frustrates her
- E: Oh dude I said that in - I said that in the Japan club e-board meeting I was like kind of force - I was like very, very like I was like-guys it's rude
- 10      C: Yeah
- E: That's just rude
- J: Hmm so do you know why they [why uh people respond in English]
- E: It might have just been the guys (*laughs*)
- C: No but she said that like she goes to like Japan too like and then everybody like
- 15        they only speak to her in English and I feel like she doesn't even have like an accent when she talks in Japanese - I guess like it's not really noticeable but they just can't like get past like the way she looks I [think they just like]
- E: [Yeah that's true]
- 20      C: Like all Japanese people or like a lot of Japanese people just assume that like I don't know like people that look Japanese speak Japanese but then if you look foreign then you like don't speak Japanese (...) yeah
- E: Yeah I think that's really bad like Japanese people in Japan or most people in Japan at least if they don't know you they'll just assume or they won't acknowledge you in
- 25        Japanese if you don't look Japanese

It appears that this *upscaling* practice (Blommaert, 2007) of not responding in Japanese to someone that does not look (or sound) Japanese occurs both on a local (their home, community and affiliated institutions) and transnational (Japan and abroad) scale, much to Claire's chagrin. Claire shared that while working at a Japanese bakery in her hometown, many individuals would simply speak English to her even though she attempted to communicate in Japanese. This practice of only responding in English to people who are “foreigners” is something that Claire and her friend, Kai, have experienced in a local Japanese context. The fact that it has occurred for both of them locally (for Kai in the Japan club on campus, and for Claire at the Japanese bakery) and internationally when both women visited Japan indicates that this practice may be an attempt on Claire's and Erika's part to *downscale* the interaction by establishing a more personal relationship with the Japanese-speaking interlocutor, offering an opening for their language ability and *Japaneseness* to be legitimized.

These experiences may be further frustrating for Claire and Erika because they are at odds with the imagined community of Japanese speakers which they initially thought they would become members of, forcing them to reconsider or reshape their conceptions of their imagined Japanese speaking community. These actions may also thus be interpreted as a social display of power in which those from Japan may not wish to grant recognition to the speech of individuals who do not meet their subjective and imagined beliefs of what a legitimate speaker of Japanese either looks or sounds like. As Flores and Rosa (2015) point out, a monolingual speaker who maintains a *monoglossic language ideology* would filter what he hears in accordance with his personal

prejudice. In a similar vein, monolingual Japanese speakers who accept only one language norm and subscribe to the notion of an imagined Japanese identity are likely to act in ways that exclude HLLs like Claire and Erika; such HLLs would be perceived as not conforming to their notion of an idealized native speaker of Japanese. Writing specifically with regard to the Japanese context, Kamada (2010) pointed out that the construction of an imagined Japanese native speaker exists alongside a discourse of *gaijin* (or foreigner) otherness. *Gaijin* typically is used to mean foreigner or outsider, and so Japanese speakers may be invoking these beliefs and enacting them in a display of an unwillingness to recognize a *gaijin* as a fully legitimate speaker. This distinction is made evident in the next excerpt (excerpt 6) through Erika's observation.

**Excerpt 6. Making a point to speak in Japanese**

- E: ... Oh but one thing I did in Tokyo like in Tokyo there are a lot of foreigners, right? But naturally because they live in Tokyo I assume that foreigners can speak Japanese so I made it a special point to talk to them in Japanese first because I think that's important like a lot of people who might not look Japanese can speak
- 5 Japanese
- C: mhm
- E: Simply because they live in Japan they have to get by, so I think its almost kind of rude to speak in English

Erika has made it a point to challenge some of these practices that people from Japanese culture tend to do when interacting with someone who does not fit the normal expectations of a Japanese speaker. She indicates that she tries to do this across both local and transnational scales. As you may recall, in Excerpt 5 she labels the practice of speaking English to an individual who is attempting to practice their Japanese as being very rude. On a local (Michigan) level, she argues that members of the Japan club should legitimize or recognize the Japanese that people use. Here, in Excerpt 6 she further expresses how she attempts to contest this practice on a transnational scale when visiting Tokyo, by claiming that she tries to make it a point to communicate with what she terms as *foreigners* first in Japanese before using English. In these ways, Erika is utilizing her linguistic repertoire to enact her identity of a bilingual HLL (Fuller, 2007) and also that of someone who understands both communities. Her experiences in the United States and Japan have provided her with a platform with which to contest a practice that she disagrees with in two ways: (1) her connection with the Japanese students at her university has enabled her to voice her concern over the practice, and (2) her understanding of the problems that non-Japanese people face when living in Japan or attempting to speak Japanese has led to her actively negate this practice through her own actions.

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#### 4. Further Discussion

The different experiences that the two sisters have had with regards to their language abilities and how other people have positioned them has led to different outcomes on how they view their abilities and how they reconcile their bilingual identity within and across multiple scales. As Wortham and Rhodes (2013) found for their participant Allie's identity of a good reader, multiple social scales (family, local community, country) came together to emphasize and solidify her identity. For Claire, there are multiple scales at play, but some may be more in conflict than they are in harmony. On the local scale, Claire received affirmation of her Japanese abilities from Japanese friends and those around her in the form of being considered more Japanese than

American. Erika contributed to this affirmation by indicating during the group interview with Author 1 that she felt that Claire understood more cultural nuances and was more aware of Japanese mannerisms.

Although she had had her abilities affirmed by her family and through newly-formed relationships, it appears that Claire’s HLL identity was still a site of struggle (Norton, 2013). For example, Claire indicated that she worries about her ability to “live and work normally” in the transnational scale of Japan, indicating a desire to not stick out if she were to decide to make her home there. This fear may stem from the fact that others have perceived that she has a strong Okinawan accent when speaking Japanese (Interview 2), or the experience of having Japanese customers only respond to her in English while working in a Japanese bakery. Kamada (2010) reported similar findings in that this idea of “sticking out” was of utmost concern, and refers to this desire to conform and its associated actions as a result as ‘enacting Japaneseness’. Kamada also found that within Japanese society there is a pervasive discourse of homogeneity, or that Japanese people tend to place a high value of conforming to what is viewed as normal Japanese behavior. This cultural value seems to have been carried into Claire’s experiences across multiple scales, and seem to have led her to construct an imagined community of Japanese speakers that she is unsure if she could ever legitimately be a part of. This fear, at least in Claire’s mind, seems to grow out of actual experiences with other speakers in translocal and transnational contexts.

Recently, though, Claire has begun to see her accent as being “strangely Okinawan” rather than being an American accent based on the observations of certain Japanese peers. Others have also positioned her locally as being the sister who is more Japanese on the inside, or the sister who understands Japanese mannerisms and cultural nuances more than her siblings. Her combined experiences and perceptions of how she views herself and her identity have been colored by how other people have positioned her within her family, the community in which she grew up, and recently in how her friends at the Japanese club on campus have viewed her. Her family literacy practices have also been a source for surprise as she has encountered Japanese international students who do not expect her Japanese to be so advanced, as well as coming into contact with others in her similar situation that do not speak Japanese as proficiently. Her social experiences as well as the recent recognition that her family situation was somewhat unique have combined to create for her a belief that she is someone that could possibly live and work normally in Japan, if she were to choose to do so. She expressed that she views herself as being both Japanese and American, and that her particular loyalties keep shifting. This may indicate that she is still coming to terms with her position as a Japanese HLL. In addition, the imagined community of Japanese speakers that she originally conceived may not have matched with what her actual experiences showed to her.

By contrast, Erika has had a slightly different experience. As reported by her, she has not been so concerned with how other Japanese individuals view whether or not she is “Japanese on the inside.” Rather, her experiences across local, translocal and transnational scales have become a boon for her ambitions to be a world traveler and to find employment. As expressed by Erika, she has experienced situations where her ability to speak and interact with other Japanese peers have led her to feel that she could be successful if she chose to live and work in Japan. She seemed to feel that she is between both American and Japanese culture, and she also indicated in a journal entry that she did not view herself as either Japanese or American. As a result, she was more willing to take a more agentive role in how she engaged with her Japanese peers locally,

especially in ways such as contesting practices that she felt were rude or inappropriate, such as not responding in Japanese to interlocutors that do not look or sound Japanese. Additionally, on a transnational level, Erika indicated that she makes it a point to downscale her interactions through using Japanese with ‘obvious foreigners’ in order to legitimize their Japanese language abilities.

Thus, while both sisters grew up in a relatively similar environment, individual characteristics coupled with their unique experiences have led Erika and Claire to encounter different ways of viewing themselves with relation to the different scales that they find themselves a part of. In that respect, their experiences were not unlike the experiences of the Ecuadorian sisters reported in King (2013). As American citizens, Claire and Erika expressed that they see a difference between themselves and their friends who are not of Japanese heritage. They have experienced a sense of disconnection with the larger scale of major cultural references or practices, such as Thanksgiving, a major American holiday and the presence of Biblical references within literature and other forms of media. From this perspective, their experiences invite comparison to those of the Bengali HLLs in Blackledge et al. (2008), who felt disconnected with their ethnic culture. On a smaller, more local scale Erika reported that they are not like other families in their practice of not going camping or fishing as a family, or exploring a local popular destination, which she noted is something that many individuals do.

Through the examination of both Claire and Erika’s experiences, it appears that their identities are, as Kamada (2010) also found, constructed through great effort and is a complex process. Both sisters are in a continual process of self-evaluation and re-evaluation in relation to the differences and similarities that they see within themselves and the imagined communities they conceived across local, translocal and transnational scales. While Claire and Erika seem to be more comfortable with the English language as a result of growing up in the United States, their abilities to connect with a separate and distinct language and culture enable them to view themselves across multiple local and translocal scales. Both women are confronted with experiences that are shaped and colored by their connections to American and Japanese culture; at the same time, these same connections lead to an awareness of how they do not fit into a particular ‘Japanese’ mold. Instead, they feel comfortable in American culture due to their familiarity with the context as well as their ideological belief that America is more multicultural. As Claire put it in one of the journal entries, “because there is no particular race that makes you American, it just comes down to citizenship” (Journal Entry, November 8, 2015). This comment highlights how Claire may view her English speaking identity as more closely tied to the fact that she has a U.S. passport and was raised in the United States, while her Japanese speaking abilities and her ethnicity may be more important to her identification as someone who is Japanese.

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#### **4.1. (Re)imagined Japanese HLL community membership**

Claire and Erika’s experiences as Japanese HLLs appear to have impacted how they imagined the larger community of Japanese speakers, across local, translocal and transnational scales. Claire saw herself as someone who is unsure of her place within the imagined community of Japanese speakers on the transnational scale. Interestingly, while she initially saw herself as being a typical member of the local and translocal imagined Japanese HLL community, she soon came to realize that this was not necessarily the case. This was evidenced by how she was often surprised at the low Japanese proficiency of other Japanese HLLs. These conceptualizations further played out in her responses to experiencing upscaling or being viewed as an “other”.

Claire’s encounters with not being acknowledged in Japanese in some instances by patrons of the Japanese bakery and her expression of surprise by the fact that other Japanese heritage speakers do not speak as much Japanese as her (Figure 3) underscores that the multiple imagined communities of Japanese speakers that she conceived of did not align with her actual experiences. A desire for Kai’s recognition by the local Japanese community is also echoed in her expressions of frustration that her biracial friend is not adequately acknowledged by other Japanese students, again emphasizing her desires for a more open and accepting community. As a consequence, and in contrast to this harsh social reality, Claire imagines a more inclusive Japanese community, one that would honor the resources of non-conventional Japanese speakers like Erika, Kai and her. Similarly, Erika’s experiences have also led her to reconceptualize her imagined community as one that is more welcoming of non-mainstream Japanese speakers. Encouragingly, she reports responding to social inequalities as a result of minoritization processes by contesting practices that do not align with her conceptions. This is demonstrated through her insistence on responding in Japanese to non-Japanese while in Japan (Excerpt 6), and her discussion with other Japanese students about how it is a rude practice.

As illustrated in the data, both Claire and Erika indicate slight differences in how they perceive their roles within the imagined community of Japanese speakers across local, translocal and transnational scales. These perceived roles, however, evolved in accordance with their respective personal experiences. Erika experienced more acceptance on a transnational scale while in Japan and interacting with the Japanese community because of her language abilities. At the same time, however, she was not viewed as being ‘true’ Japanese by Japanese speakers on the local scale, thereby exemplifying Blommaert’s (2007) astute observation that not all discourses are valued equally in all locales. As a result, Erika did not report feeling unsure of her place within an imagined community of Japanese speakers across multiple scales, which in turn led her to state that she actively strives to change the practices of others both on the local and transnational scale. Claire had experiences that were the opposite – on a local scale she was treated and viewed as being more Japanese, while on a more translocal and transnational scale (outside of her groups of friends and school associates) her attempts to initiate conversations in Japanese were rebuffed. These experiences led Claire to sometimes question her ability to be accepted as a legitimate member of the imagined community of Japanese speakers on the transnational scale, even though she was accepted on the local scale (i.e., by the Japanese group and her friends on the college campus).

## **Conclusion**

This paper has illuminated how the multiple scales in which our two sister participants find themselves interconnect and interpenetrate one another. What can be taken from our case study of Claire and Erika is that experiences can produce effects that reach beyond the local and could lead to struggles when reconciling with a HLL identity that bears a transnational dimension. Both sisters viewed many practices surrounding them from a unique perspective, as both being a part of and distinctly different from monolingual and non-transnational individuals. Given that Claire and Erika did not express interest in pursuing further education in the Japanese language due to their advanced abilities, it may be of worth for administrators and educators to (1) take into account the varied range of backgrounds and experiences of HLLs, (2) redesign the language



curriculum in ways that cater to the needs of HLLs like them, and (3) create structured support systems (e.g., a resource center or support groups) that work in consultation with each other. Such a concerted effort will assist other HLLs in improving their language skills to accomplish their language use and learning goals. Specifically, ensuring that HLLs are aware of the kinds of available resources that could cater to their specific needs may assist individuals like Claire and Erika in overcoming challenges that may arise as a result of negotiating the written language and cultural norms. HLLs in situations akin to Claire and Erika's may benefit from programs that provide interactions and discussion about their identities and how they align with the communities across local, translocal and transnational contexts. At the end of the day, we need to remember that language learners are embedded within complex ecologies. These ecologies, which are characterized by multiple scales and constitutive of the imagined communities into which learners seek to gain membership, can facilitate language learning if they are harnessed effectively.

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