Multilingual Couple Talk[1]: Romance, Identity and the Political Economy of Language

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'The Special Day'

English was the language spoken by my first object of romantic infatuation – the Hollywood actor, Tom Cruise. When I saw *Top Gun* for the first time, I could not believe that someone like him existed. I remember madly screaming '*Kakkoiii*, *kakkoiii*!!' with my equally hysterical friend in the cinema. Maybe one day, as I used to believe so firmly, I'd get a chance to meet him in person. I would tell him how I dreamed about him, day after day, night after night. For this special day, I needed to know English.

Unfortunately, this dreamy passion did not translate into learning English at school. In fact, I *hated* English as a school subject. As thousands of fellow Japanese from my generation would agree, it was the teaching method – grammar translation – that killed my interest. In all honesty, it was not just English classes that I dreaded attending. School work in general did not mean much to me back then. The reason: I grew up in a working class suburb of Yokohama and my parents had little interest in their daughter's education. English? What for? There was simply no connection between my English classroom in my hometown, Tsurumi and the English speaking, glamorous world of Hollywood, to which my 'Maverick' belonged. Unsurprisingly, I finished high school with little knowledge of English (and all other subjects, to be more exact). I was perfectly happy to continue my carefree lifestyle into early adulthood with a part-time job in an *izakaya* (a pub) in Tokyo. Life was good – for a while.

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When I turned 20, anxiety set in. Somehow it started to bother me that I had no tertiary education, no specialized skills, no specific direction or passion in my life. I can't recall exactly how, but I figured that studying English might improve my prospects. In the mind of a naïve 20 year-old girl, it happened something like the equation of 'English' = 'Tom speaks it' = 'international' = 'flight attendant as a career?' = 'cool!' I enrolled myself in a two-year college of English in Tokyo, which was known for its English-only approach, spartan work ethics and their business motto: we take anyone as long as they pay the school fee. It suited me fine.

My two years there turned out to be the most rewarding learning experience. There I learned English from scratch through immersion – all classes and conversation with teachers and fellow students had to be in English and we were fined 1,000 yen if we were caught speaking Japanese on the school site (my total contribution – 12,000 yen). We produced everything in English, essays, group reports, speeches and graduate theses. Periodically we presented English drama productions, and I happily volunteered to sing *Danger Zone* and *Take My Breath Away* as a solo performance. As a school policy, all these writings and presentations had to be checked and approved by native speaker teachers from the UK, the US, Canada or Australia. Through this 'native speaker check' system, however, we developed a somewhat problematic belief about English language learning and use. It was a belief that made us think we 'need' a native speaker's assurance in all things English. It was not our language, hence we had no authority.

This belief powerfully informed my romantic life, too. Everyone has certain preferences for their partner. Mine had to do with linguistic identity, that is, being a native speaker of English. Since my arrival in Australia in 1992, all my romantic partners were native speakers of English, although their cultural and racial backgrounds varied widely. Living in a predominantly English-speaking Western country, I saw my identity as a second language speaker of English and being Asian as a disadvantage. Thus I wanted my partner to be 'perfect', to be someone from whom I could get assurance in all things English, and Western. It *never ever* occurred to me that I would get romantically involved with someone whose first language was not English, let alone get married to one. Until I met Marcin.

'My Lucky Night' and Beyond

The Three Wise Monkeys was quite busy that night. It was the final day of the 2005 Australian Open and I was watching the men's final match on the pub's big screen with my research

participants, Eika and Ichi[2]. At that time, I was conducting fieldwork for my PhD research on Japanese women learning English in Sydney (Piller & Takahashi, 2006; Takahashi, forthcoming). Some of my participants were frequent visitors to Three Wise Monkeys, a popular pub on George Street in Sydney, which was, and still is, regarded as a cheesy pick-up joint by many locals. While my main intention was data collection that night, I was also enjoying drinks with 'friends'.

When the tennis match was over, we decided to go upstairs for more drinks and live music. As soon as we found a table, two young Irish men approached us. As an ethnographer-researcher, I'd consciously observe their interaction. I quickly gathered that Eika and Ichi were not interested in talking to them – they were not good-looking enough and their accent was major put-off as it made their conversation impossible to understand. To show their lack of interest, the women left for the dance floor, but the Irish men did not get the message. They followed the women, trying hard to dance with them.

Looking at the men's attempt from the table, I was thinking to myself, "boys, you don't have a chance", and wrote this observation into a little notebook. During my fieldwork in Sydney, I often observed this kind of gendered L2 interaction, where young Japanese women had the upper-hand to decide who could talk to them, how long and about what. I found this really interesting as it challenges the essentialist assumption that non-native speakers of English are powerless, lacking confidence and thus disadvantaged. Many of my participants were often powerful, confident and took advantage of the discourse of the desired Asian *other* – they ruled, quite brutally sometimes, in a romantically charged social context in Sydney[3] (Piller & Takahashi, 2006).

Left alone, I was surveying the crowd in the pub and suddenly noticed a Caucasian man drinking with his friends near our table. I noticed him because he was exceptionally good-looking, well-built and had a gorgeous smile. After we exchanged a polite, non-verbal hello, I made a quick gesture, inviting him for a chat (so much so for my interest being 'strictly research only'). When he arrived at my table, I was pleasantly surprised that not only was he even more handsome up close, but he was also surprisingly well-mannered for someone

[2] All the participants in my research were given pseudonyms.
[3] Although I do not elaborate the link between race, sexuality and gender in the process of second language learning here, William Tetteh's (Forthcoming) research on African L2 English speaking women in Sydney illuminates the issue. She reports that because black African women's sexuality is either absent or negated in the public space, they do not have access to an identity as a powerful sexual *Other* and thus the discourse of English native speaker romantic partners as linguistic resource in learning L2 is unavailable for them.

hanging out at a pub 'like this'. "I'm Marcin, nice to meet you", he introduced himself and politely thanked me for the unexpected invite.

As we talked on, however, I was beginning to feel puzzled. Umm? he sounds 'different'. Based on his Caucasian look, I simply assumed that he was Australian or American, or at least some variety of native English speaker (Piller, 2002b). As I started to hear his L2 'accent' more clearly, I felt slightly disappointed. The inevitable question came to mind; "Where are you from?" It's a tricky question in a country like Australia – it immediately positions people in an identity category of 'outsiders' (Farrell, 2008) and I myself feel awkward, if not resentful, every time someone asks me the very question (See Otsuji's chapter for more discussion on this issue). Nevertheless, it was perhaps because of the few drinks I had had earlier, or his friendliness, or my hope to find that he was from some 'cool' European country, or my ego to position myself as a 'local', I asked him anyway. "I'm from Poland", he said, with an even more gorgeous smile on his face. I was repeating "Poland…" several times in my mind trying to retrieve any relevant (and possibly glamorous) information about his country in my mental drawers. No. Nothing. I knew absolutely nothing about Poland. Now, he is not only a non-native speaker of English, but also someone from a country I know nothing about. It would have been the end of my flirting escapade.

But that night, I kept on talking to him. Not even a single moment of losing interest throughout the night. The more I listened to him, the less I heard his accent. The more I learned about him, the less I cared about where he was from (or not knowing anything at all about Poland). I was just so completely mesmerised by his amazing looks - beautiful blue eyes, long eye lashes, gorgeous smiles, large chest and big arms – and his sweetness and gentlemanly manners, that my initial unease with his linguistic and national identities took a backseat, and then, a complete exit. "If I can just spend one night looking at this gorgeous guy", I thought to myself, "who cares if he's not a native speaker or where he comes from?" At that time, I was not interested in a long-term relationship (my relationship of eight years had ended a few months earlier). Nothing else mattered to me but to finish my doctoral thesis. I couldn't care less whether he was going to ask me for my phone number or if he was going to call me the next day, let alone whether or not an L2 romance would work. It was my 'lucky night'. Look at him, he is gorgeous. I'll just enjoy the 'view', for tonight.

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"*Ohayo~*! *Pankeeki tabetai*?" Once a week or so, my husband wakes me up by asking me if I want pancakes for breakfast, in his fluent Japanese. As I drag myself out of bed and wash my face in slow motion, he yells out from the kitchen, "*Hayakuuu*, *hayakuuu*!" with a pretend annoyance. "*Hai, hai…*", I respond grudgingly, and by the time I sit down at our dining table, my first pancake arrives. "*Hai, dooozo*!" says Marcin with beaming smiles. It was exactly four years ago when these gorgeous smiles captured my heart. Perhaps he's gained a few extra kilos (more places to kiss, as a Polish saying goes), but his beautiful blue eyes, big chest, musclely arms, sweetness, and of course his accented English, are still intact.

Between my lucky night at Three Wise Monkeys and this morning in our Sydney apartment, many things have happened – a week after that night, he 'officially' asked me to be his girlfriend; after submitting my PhD thesis, I dragged him to Japan and lived there for a year and half, where he learned many Japanese words and phrases including "Please allow me to have your daughter as my wife"; after coming back to Sydney for my work, we exchanged our marriage vows in my second and his third language in August 2008; in the following month, we went to Lodz, his hometown in Poland, for a wedding party organized by his ecstatic, loving parents, whose next dream is to become live-in caretakers of their future grandchild. I'm so proud that Marcin is fluent in Japanese. My Polish is nowhere near as good as his second, or third or even his fourth language. 'It's not a competition', he smiles. I say 'Yes, it is' as I frown. When our first child finally arrives, her first language will be Polish. For that special day, I want to know Polish.

Multilingual Couple Talk

My years of infatuation with Tom Cruise have been over for quite some time. Instead, the list of people I idolize today include quite different faces. They are researchers, activists, and journalists whose work and insights have broadened my mind and inspire me to explore the relationship between language and identity in our lives. On the top of the list is Ingrid Piller (2002a, 2002b, 2007, 2008; 2009). This paper was inspired by, and titled after, her research on *Bilingual Couples Talk* (2002a), in which she explores the discursive construction of bilingual couplehood between linguistic and national border-crossers, namely L1 speakers of English and L1 speakers of German. Piller argues that our identity is not a matter of labels and categories,

but rather an 'act of doing'. Most of this ongoing construction of identity is done linguistically, in other words, "language and social identity are mutually constitutive" (p. 12). Taking the social constructionist approach, Piller illuminates complex ways in which her participants 'do' their bilingual and cross-cultural couplehood in their private talks, and highlights how their private practices are in turn informed by wider public discourses such as gender, nationality, immigration and international marriage. Obviously her participants' linguistic, cultural and racial backgrounds are different from ours. Yet I've never learned so much about my own romantic relationship from an academic book as I did from her book. On this note, I'll begin this commentary section by drawing on her work in order to interpret my lucky night and beyond. In particular I will address the questions of 'language desire', language use and shift, and proficiency, which embody our identity as a multilingual couple.

First of all, central to my lucky night narrative is the 'slight' disappointment with Marcin's linguistic identity, a non-native speaker of English. Piller's conceptualization of 'language desire' sheds light on this (2002a, p. 100). She found that many of her participants, female partners who were L2 English speakers, reported a great deal of emotional attachments to the English language and embraced the widely circulating masculine discourses, such as Wild West America or English gentlemen, *before* they met their partners, i.e. US or UK native speakers of English. As one participant, Natalie, points out, she studied English because "I always wanted to marry a cowboy" and "I've always liked English", and her marriage to her US-American husband was "not at all coincidental" (Piller, 2002a, p. 101). I can wholeheartedly empathize with Natalie, except that her cowboy was my Top Gun pilot. But both were still US native speakers of English, our shared romantic attraction. The flipside of language desire for English was at work all my life, i.e. I never ever considered romance with non-native speakers of English, no matter how attractive or popular they were. In an English-speaking (heterosexual) romantic market, Hollywood films and the world of advertising alike, there is an ongoing discursive construction and promotion of certain European men, French men in particular, as romantic and their accent as sexy (Piller, 2003). As a second language speaker of English myself, I found 'accented English', not as sexy, but an obstacle to proper communication and also a sign of these men's inability to provide emotional (and linguistic) assurance. This clearly explains my 'slight' disappointment on that particular night.

In fact, Marcin's linguistic identity did become an issue later on and it continues to play a major role in our relationship to date. For instance, as a 'traditional' man that Marcin was, he asked

me, "would you please consider becoming my girlfriend", one week after we met. I was ecstatic, but also anxious inside. When we were just 'dating' without such an official declaration, it was not a problem. But this official pledge for a commitment as a couple brought back my initial concern regarding his language background. Do you think it'd work? English is my second language and it's his third! I even consulted with my friends, who rolled their eyes at my concern as trivial and just wanted to meet my new boyfriend. It was not trivial at all, however. Because I knew that I could no longer ask my partner to edit my PhD thesis, draft my emails to officials, improve my pronunciation, or finish my sentence in a conversation, in English.

Most of these things listed above are what I do for him now. And such discursive practices are often a site of contestation over power. We both know that neither of us is 'perfect' in English, but we also know that I have more developed linguistic skills than he does. 'Correct me if I mispronounce something'. As requested, I do so every now and then, but obviously this hurts his pride as a competent speaker of English. Instead of accepting my suggestion, he sticks to his original pronunciation on purpose, which, if I'm not in the best mood, drives me crazy. "Very often, the person one feels the deepest love and affection for is also likely to be the most irritating person in one's life" (Piller, 2002a, p. 3). Nothing captures ongoing negotiation of identity between Marcin and I better than this.

Another issue that Piller wanted to find out was language choice and use among the bilingual couples. She was not convinced about the prevalent assumption that language shift to the majority language is a 'done deal' resulting from linguistic intermarriage (2002a). Her study indeed reveals how it was often not the case among the German-English bilingual couples and their language use and choice was a fluid, but highly contested practice which intersected with their identities, symbolic value of the two languages and communities of practice in which they participated. In our early days, Marcin and I predominantly used English as a couple language. It was the only language we used to communicate with each other, because Polish (or let alone his second language, Russian) was unknown to me as much as Japanese was to him. As our morning conversation above shows, however, there is an emerging shift towards an increased use of Japanese in our relationship, which is clearly a minority language in Australia. As I will show below, our increasing use of Japanese in both private and public space is "an act of doing" our multilingual couple and cross-cultural couplehood (Piller, 2002a, p. 2). Let me expand on this by first looking at how it all began.

When we moved to Japan in 2006, Marcin immediately took onboard a new challenge of learning Japanese as his fourth language. He bought (very expensive) Japanese textbooks, attended Japanese classes at a local community centre, watched TV, mingled with my family and Japanese friends and constantly nagged me to teach him useful words – day and night. Of course, he made many mistakes in the beginning. When my mother asked him if he would like more rice during our dinner, he beamed at this opportunity to show off his newly learned phrase, '*Onaka ippai desu* (I'm full)', but actually told her, '*Onanii ippai desu*! (I masturbate a lot!)' I kept eating in silence. No matter how embarrassing his mistakes like this may be, we are in fact very fond of these because they form part of our shared, cherished narrative – a discursive resource in performing and creating our identity as a multilingual couple. It signals, not how deficient he was as a language learner, but how far he has come. 'Remember what you said to mum?'; such a simple conversational cue, yet it powerfully brings up a warm memory of our time in Yokohama, allowing us to achieve a sense of further intimacy.

To him, however, I was not a proactive teacher in Japan. He was actually right. At that time I didn't see any benefit in his increased fluency in Japanese. I had L2 Japanese speaking partners in my early years in Australia, but I was never willing to use Japanese as couple language. Just like many new migrants do (Colic-Peisker, 2009; Norton, 2000), I had so much social and emotional investment in establishing an identity as a competent L2 speaker of English – I needed to compensate for my Asian identity by achieving 'native-like' fluency. At the same time, I was secretly worried that I'd be seen as a Japanese woman who blindly goes for a Japanese speaking Western man because she has a Western fetish but can't speak English - a prevalent misogynistic criticism in the 1980s, aka the "Yellow Cab" discourse (Kelsky, 2001). Thanks to support from my family and friends in Japan, his Japanese improved considerably. But I thought he'd lose interest in learning Japanese once we moved back to Australia. How useful could it be there? I couldn't have been more wrong.

Back in Sydney in 2007, he became an instant celebrity. He was no longer just an ordinary L2 English speaking migrant, but rather, a rare breed – a L2 English AND L4 Japanese speaking Polish man. His Japanese can be best understood as linguistic capital, which, in his case, immediately transfers into tremendous social capital (Bourdieu, 1991). This transfer is necessarily a performative act, achieved in interaction with others who evaluate and respond to his performance; every time he 'happens to' disclose his rare linguistic identity, he receives the 'Wooow, you can speak Japanese!' kinds of instant social gratification, admiration and respect.

He is definitely out with his friends if he answers my call on his mobile phone, "*Moshi moshiii*?" and tries to converse entirely in Japanese. Since the 1990s, Japanese has emerged as one of the most prestigious foreign languages, widely taught in Australia. Surely many Japanese speaking Aussies are around? In this country haunted by the monolingual mindset (Clyne, 2005), however, a white man speaking Japanese as a fourth language still remains as a wow material.

As the good partner that I am, I often go along with him, even when I am not entirely sure what he is talking about. Our use of Japanese no longer worries me – I have rewritten my negative narrative, and gained enough self-assurance in my identity as a competent user of English and as a mature woman. Now I draw tremendous joy from seeing Marcin receive the special attention. This is my most favourite 'act of doing' our multilingual couplehood.

When there is no one else to impress, our use of Japanese functions differently. Piller (2002a, p. 154) discusses, for instance, that some of the bilingual couples she worked with had a preferred 'conflict language'. In their case, English is often perceived as 'easier, simpler, and quicker' for a row, but this inevitably disadvantages L2 English speaking partners. As Marcin asked me to stress, we do not fight, very often. But when we do, English is the main language, together with Marcin's occasional outbursts in Polish (supposedly 'self-directed' swearwords). In my view, fighting is relatively easier than dealing with the aftermath, which often requires us to swallow our pride and reaffirm our love for our partner. For us, Japanese has become our 'make-up language'. He not only learned the linguistic skills from me and my female Japanese friends, but he also mastered the performative repertory of acting 'cute', in a typical Japanese feminine way. Thus, it makes it easier for him to apologize because, I quote, "I don't feel so sorry when I say it in Japanese – it's too cute to be serious". Indeed, even if he insists on an apology by saying, "*gomennasai wa*! (say sorry!)", his use of Japanese and well executed performance of cuteness soften the possible harshness of such demand. Every time Marcin so demurely utters "*gomennasaaai…*" with his head down and hands on his lap, my anger quickly melts away – this, of course, inevitably disadvantages me, the L1 Japanese speaking partner.

So far, it may sound as if he is the only one trying to learn his partner's L1. I do speak Polish, to an extent. However, the question of 'how well' is a difficult one to answer because one's proficiency is often an ongoing co-construction between partners, and a "product of performance" (Pennycook, 2007, p. 59). For instance, Piller (2002a) found that the bilingual couples' L2 proficiency or linguistic knowledge in their partners' L1 is 'interactively' assessed

and constructed in private discourses. It certainly applies to our case, too. Thanks to Marcin's unyielding positive remarks about my Polish, I quickly gained confidence, and began claiming ownership over the language - even publicly ('the Modesty Maxim out of the window)(Leech, 1983). For instance, when I met his Polish friends in Sydney, I'd confidently declare, 'I speak Polish' and expect thunderous applause. This delusional linguistic identity, however, came to a crisis when I finally found myself surround by his parents, relatives and friends - monolingual Polish speakers – during our 2008 wedding visit to Poland. What I gained from this experience is (1) a renewed confidence in humankind that even without a common language, we can truly communicate and embrace each other's company IF there is a real willingness to share the communicative burden in understanding each other, and (2) a more realistic view of my fluency in Polish. Quite a shift it was - from being a (over)confident owner to a humble L3 'learner' of Polish.

Epilogue

Research on 'private' conversations presents very unique methodological issues. As Piller (2001, 2002a) shares hers with us, I too encountered a number of ethical and methodological dilemmas during my first attempt at microethnography of multilingual couple talk. My immediate concern was whether or not it was necessary to get a formal ethics approval from my institution and official consent from Marcin in collecting and presenting 'data' for an academic publication. I emailed this concern to my trusted colleague and her advice read: "Don't tell me you didn't include this in your prenuptial;-)". Since we didn't even think about writing one, I resolved that I'd just ask for his personal permission. He was happy to 'participate' – initially. As I showered him with questions about our first meeting, our linguistic practices, future parenthood and so on, and on, for the last one month, he became increasingly reluctant to talk about our 'private' thoughts and practices. When I took out my IC tape-recorder from my bag and began taping our conversation one day, he groaned; "Forget it". So I just listened, tried to remember his every single comment and understand and interpret what it means for him, me, and us vis-à-vis wider discourses of second language learning, multilingualism and identity. The result is this paper - polyphony of our voices as a multilingual couple in love, multilingual parents-to-be. I thank David and Julie for giving us this opportunity to revisit the very special

night in our lives and expand our imagination for our next special day, which is still in its making.

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