

Piller, I. & K. Takahashi. Language work aboard the low-cost airline. Submitted to: Duchêne, A., M.

Moyer & C. Roberts. Eds. *Language, Migration and Social (In)equality. A Critical Sociolinguistic*

*Perspective on Institutions and Work.* Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

# ***Language work aboard the low-cost airline***

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## ***Introduction***

Flight attendants can be considered as transnational workers par excellence: transnational mobility is what they “do” on a daily basis. In addition to doing transnational mobility for a living, they could also be considered prototypical service workers: despite the heavy physical demands of flight attendance work, it is considered low-skilled work and flight attendants are mostly judged for the emotional, aesthetic and linguistic work they perform. Finally, they are also typical of the neoliberal global economic order in that theirs is a low-wage sector where, since the deregulation of the aviation industry from the 1980s onwards, competition has largely been fought on the terrain of labour costs. In contrast to most other low-wage sectors, however, flight attendant work is widely seen as desirable and even glamorous. Consequently, flight attendant work can be considered an ideal site to explore the intersections between mobility, institutions and language. In this chapter we do so by focussing on the employment practices of a transnational airline operating in the Asia-Pacific and how these are experienced by a group of Japan-born and Australia-based flight attendants working for that airline.

Employment as a flight attendant holds a very special place in the dreams and aspirations of many young women in Japan. Being a flight attendant is seen as an opportunity to move overseas and to develop a glamorous identity as a multilingual cosmopolitan. These aspirations coincide with the recruitment strategies of Australian airlines, which increasingly hire Asian flight attendants as a way of extending their operations into Asia. We thus find that their mobility is embedded in a global system of ideologies and practices that pit English against other languages, native speakers of English against non-native speakers of English, women seen as naturally demure and caring against men, Asians seen as naturally graceful and docile against Westerners, and nationals of developed countries who are seen as spoiled and demanding against nationals from the Global South, who are seen as “hungry” enough to make submissive workers. Japanese flight attendants occupy conflicting positions in these global hierarchies: their work entails doing “being Japanese” but also doing “being not Australian” and “being not Thai.”

The remainder of this chapter is structured as follows. In the next section, we will introduce the context of our study, namely the changing role of flight attendant work, Asia-Pacific aviation as an employment sector, and the low-cost carrier for which our participants worked at the time of data collection in 2008. We will call that airline *Flying High*. In that background section we draw on previous research, career guides and media reports. We then introduce our participants, four female and one male Japan-born and Australia-based flight attendants working for *Flying High*. Their narratives demonstrate that ideology and practice intersect in complex ways on the terrains of work, gender, culture, nationality, location and language. We structure our exploration of these intersections around the two languages central to our participants’ experiences: Japanese, as the language that got them their dream job, and English, as the language through which daily exclusions, from being under heightened surveillance to not being rostered for desirable routes, are played out.

### ***Flying High with Flying High?***

Since the beginning of commercial aviation in Japan in the 1950s, employment as a flight attendant has held a special place in the dreams of many young women, as is true internationally (Baum, 2010). In the early days, the actual opportunity to become a flight attendant was exclusive to the daughters of the upper-middle class (Chizuko Kawamura, personal

communication). In this, too, Japan was no exception (Baum, 2010). With flying being the prerogative of a relatively small elite, airlines sought to employ women of a certain upper-class sociability and sophistication to match their passengers' sensibilities. As far as female occupations go, a career as a flight attendant provided a relatively high status, salary and job security. This started to change with the deregulation of the aviation industry from the 1980s onwards, first in the USA and a few years later in Asia and Europe. Neoliberals like to cite the fact that airfares have fallen around 25% since 1990 as evidence of the unequivocal success of removing government controls and turning aviation over to the free market (Smith Jr. & Cox, 2008). By contrast, labor analysts point to the fact that the drop in airfares (and the concomitant rise in profits) has mostly been achieved through the reduction of labor costs. In Australia, for instance, pilots' wages have dropped by as much as 50% since the 1990s while job security has disappeared and workloads have increased (Schulte & Zhu, 2005). For flight attendants, these indicators are even more dramatic with low-cost carrier *Virgin Australia* (formerly *Virgin Blue*), for instance, paying wages of only 34% of those that used to be paid by the national carriers *Ansett Australia* and *Qantas* (Weller, 2008). Furthermore, low cost carriers operating in and into Australia are "Australian" only in name and branding but, in actual fact, are multinational corporations employing staff in different locations according to local labor markets and subject to local industrial relations policies.

In mid-2011, for instance, exploitative employment conditions at low-cost carrier *Jetstar*, a fully-owned *Qantas* subsidiary, became a national concern when it emerged that Thailand-based flight attendants were paid less than a tenth of Australia-based crew (Cannane, 2011). Additionally, the Thai flight attendants' employment contracts stipulate 20-hour-shifts and these can even be extended at the employer's discretion, raising serious fatigue concerns. Furthermore, they are virtually indentured because they have to pay back 4.5 months worth of salary when they leave their contract prematurely (Cannane, 2011). *Jetstar* responded to these revelations by claiming that they had no control over local market conditions, particularly as they did not actually employ Thailand-based flight attendants themselves but had outsourced flight-attendant contracting in Thailand to tourism employment agency *Tour East Thailand*. In a further twist, *Tour East Thailand* is partly owned by the *Qantas* Group, *Jetstar's* parent company. *Qantas* has similar partly-owned employment agencies to source crew operating, inter alia, out of Indonesia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Vietnam (Sandilands, 2011).

The dire reality of flight attendant work that has emerged in recent years has done little to dent its glamorous image, as Baum (2010) observes in his analysis of the fictional representations of UK and US flight attendants in the period from 1930 to 2010. In Japan, the image of flight attendants has been strongly shaped by the 1980s megahit TV melodrama *ステューワーデス物語* [*Stewardess Story*]. *Stewardess Story* was about a group of young women training to be flight attendants for *Japan Airlines (JAL)*, which, at that time, was one of Japan's flagship carriers and the largest Asian airline (“客室乗務員 [Flight attendant],” 2011). In contrast to the upper-class image that flight attendant work still held at the time, the main character, Chiaki, was an ordinary woman, with limited English, whose eventual success in passing the training was presented as due to her determination, her hard work, and the help she received from her fellow trainees and a passionate male instructor. *Stewardess Story* inspired desire and raised the hopes of many “ordinary” young girls of that generation that a glamorous career as a flight attendant was an attainable career goal for them, too.

The glamorous fictional representations of flight attendants in Japan and internationally are echoed in – and further cemented through – career guides and training institutes. “Cool career” guides such as Thomas & Nations (2009), a US publication, abound. In Japan, the glamour of flight attendants is inextricably linked to the glamour of English as an indispensable career tool for women, which we have analyzed elsewhere (Piller & Takahashi, 2006, 2010). To demonstrate that point further we will here examine two such career guides in some more detail, namely *語学を生かして、世界で働く* [Career overseas by using language skills] (Itakura, 2006) and *英語でリッチ!* [Get rich with English!] (Sasaki, 2006).

Itakura (2006) lists nineteen desirable English-related careers in four job categories, namely international relations, tourism, language study, and business. Each job entry consists of a short narrative of a woman holding that particular job, followed by the author's advice on how to obtain the job. One of the jobs listed in the tourism section is flight attendant, featuring the story of Miwako Leitmüller, who works for *Lufthansa*. Describing flight attending as her “childhood dream,” Miwako traces that dream back to *Stewardess Story*, which she says she watched enthusiastically. In a typical narrative complication, she initially has to give up her dream because her applications to Japan's two domestic airlines are unsuccessful. Instead she settles for work with a travel agency, where she often gets to watch “flight attendants wearing their cool uniforms walking by briskly with their carry-on luggage” (Itakura, 2006, p. 85).

Motivated by envy, she resurrects her dream, attends a flight attendant school, polishes her English, and finds a job with the German flagship carrier *Lufthansa*. Sticking to her dream turns out to be beneficial all around because in addition to a job she also finds love in Germany. Her story's happy ending relates to both work and family: *Lufthansa's* flexible employment program allows her to combine work and motherhood, something she thinks would have been impossible if she had worked for a Japanese company.

Sasaki's (2006) format is similar. Chapter Three "Using English in the Work of Your Dreams" starts with the story of 29-year-old Emi Kawamura, who flies for an unidentified Asian airline. Under the headline "Never give up and be persistent when confronted with challenges! Achieving the dream of becoming a flight attendant after six years," Emi's story begins with her girlhood dream of becoming a flight attendant. In order to realize her dream, she goes to the UK to study as an overseas student, attends a flight attendant school and, additionally, a private English language school specializing in preparation for the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC). In her case, the complication also results from the fact that her job applications for flight attendant work keep being rejected over a period of six years. The happy ending occurs when her persistence is finally rewarded and she is hired by a foreign airline based in Asia. The reader is left with Emi sharing her plans to move to the UK. While this is a non-sequitur, its position in the story seems to suggest that flight attendant work in Asia is not an end in itself but a step to bigger and better things.

Neither story is a complete fairy tale. Itakura (2006) points out that flight attendant work is physically taxing, involves irregular shifts and limited opportunities for career development. And, the promise of Sasaki's (2006) title, *Get rich with English!*, notwithstanding, Emi's flight attendant dream job pays JPY30,000 less than her previous work. Reality also intrudes on websites where job seekers discuss their experiences. In an exchange on *Yahoo Chiebukuro*, for example, someone wants to know whether flight attendant is the most popular occupation among women and the "best" answer (as selected by the inquirer) says "The salary and benefits (because of the introduction of temping and hourly rates) are on the decline, and the nature of the work is simply hostessing and waitressing. Who wants to look after drunk customers or clean up their vomit and the toilets?"<sup>1</sup>

While the popularity of flight attending is evidently on the decline and the gap between dreams and reality is slowly starting to emerge, a 2005 survey found that flight attendants

continue to be among the top ten most popular careers for women in Japan.<sup>ii</sup> In addition to fictional accounts and career guides, it is also flight attendant schools and English schools with their vested interest, which keep the dream alive. The websites of flight attendant schools<sup>iii</sup> feature images of stunningly beautiful, confident-looking professional women, who look like feminine masters of the universe. In addition to flight attendant schools in Japan, there are now also schools in Australia targeting the Japanese market with the offer of a combination of flight attendant course, English study and overseas experience, such as the *Aviation Study Centre* in Brisbane, where the low-cost carrier *Virgin Australia* happens to be headquartered. The “cabin crew course” on offer there provides evidence of the ways in which flight attendant work has been deskilled. In an 8-week course, and for a fee of AUD5,950, students can gain four “Australian government recognised certificates,” namely a Certificate II in Transport & Distribution, a Security Services Certificate, a Senior First Aid Certificate, and a Responsible Service of Alcohol Certificate.<sup>iv</sup>

The ways to market the glamour of flight attendants and to turn the desire these discourses engender into a profit are seemingly endless. HIS, one of the largest Japanese tourism providers, for instance, markets “7-day flight attendance experience tours” with *Malaysia Airlines* and *Virgin Atlantic*. For JPY194,000 (*Malaysia*) or JPY398,000 (*Virgin*), this package tour allows participants to spend a few days at a *Malaysia* site in Kuala Lumpur or a *Virgin* site in London and to experience training in flight attendant work, to attend English classes and to have a make-up and hairstyle makeover. On their last day, tour members get to wear authentic *Malaysia* or *Virgin* flight attendant uniforms and to have their picture taken in front of a branded airplane as if they were a real crew.<sup>v</sup>

The desire of many Japanese women for flight attendant work, for English and for an international career, coincides with Western stereotypes of Asian women as ideally and naturally suited for service work. Epitomized in the *Singapore Girl*, a trademark of *Singapore Airlines*, Asian flight attendants are often marketed as the serenely beautiful, warmly caring and demurely elegant embodiment of “Asian values and hospitality” (“Singapore Girl,” 2011). Airlines with predominantly Asian crews have long used discourses of the essential Asian-ness of their flight attendants in their marketing. *Flying High*, too, promotes itself as “the best of Australian and Asian hospitality” through the embodied identities of their “warm, friendly and extremely attentive” flight attendants. For originally non-Asian airlines such as *Flying High*, the

employment of Asian flight attendants has thus also been central to their attempts to break into the Asian market and to visibly “demonstrate” their Asian-ness.

While Asian flight attendants have long been stereotyped as “ideal” flight attendants and have come to serve as an embodiment of many airlines’ brand identities, their image as docile, their relative lack of unionization and, increasingly, the reality of their under-payment have made Asian flight attendants often unpopular with their Western colleagues. As early as 1983, Hochschild (2003, p. 130), for instance, was quoting a unionized flight attendant at *PanAm* as saying that management “would love nothing better than to get rid of us [=US flight attendants] and fill the plane with loving, submissive Japanese women.”

In sum, in the course of the deregulation of aviation, flight attendant work has undergone dramatic changes from high-skilled, secure, well-paid and respected women’s work to low-skilled, casual, poorly paid and devalued work. However, the perceived glamour of flight attendants has been much slower to die. As a matter of fact, fictional representations, women’s magazines, career guides and training institutes continue to keep the dream alive and have found additional means to turn those desires into a profit. As a matter of fact, in some of these practices, such as study-abroad flight attendant schools or flight attendant experience package holidays, the boundary between work and leisure consumption has become blurred. The commodification of the dream of flight attending, both as a means to obscure the reality of exploitative labor practices and to promote consumption, is also apparent in the images particularly associated with Asian flight attendants. In the next section, we will now explore how these tensions play out in the narratives of five Japan-born and Australia-based flight attendants working for *Flying High*.

## ***Participants***

In 2008 we conducted fieldwork for a research project investigating the political economy of languages in tourism between Australia and Japan.<sup>vi</sup> We interviewed two groups of participants in the Gold Coast and Sydney in Australia, and in Tokyo and Yokohama in Japan. The first group consisted of tourism service providers catering for Japanese tourists to Australia. The second group consisted of Japanese individuals who had travelled to or lived in Australia on a short-term basis. As part of the former group, KT interviewed five Japan-born and Australia-

based flight attendants working for *Flying High* at the time. Each individual interview was conducted in Japanese and, with one exception, lasted for more than 3 hours. Interview questions were broad but centered on their language learning and career trajectories, their current work, and their future plans. Table 1 provides an overview of the participants and we will now briefly introduce each participant.

**Table 1: Overview of participants**

Pseudonym	Year of birth	First visit to Australia	Visa status	Languages	Education	Previous work experience	Hiring location
Eri	1975	2001	Temporary work visa	Japanese, English, Spanish	Flight attendant school	Grand hostess and flight attendant in Hong Kong and Japan	Japan
Fumie	1972	1997	Permanent residency	Japanese, English, Korean	Hotel school	Various tourism-related customer service jobs in Australia and New Zealand	Australia
Juri	1974	1995	Temporary work visa	Japanese, English, French	Graduated from a women's university	Various tour guide roles in France, Japan and	Japan



						New Zealand	
Ryoko	1982	2001	Temporary work visa	Japanese, English	Vocational hospitality degree	Various waitressing and receptionist roles in Australia	Japan
Takashi	1972	1997	Permanent residency	Japanese, English	Tourism degree	Various tourism-related service jobs in Australia and Japan	Australia

At the time of the interview, **Eri** was 33 years old and had been based in Sydney for a bit over a year. She had moved to Sydney for her job after having been hired by *Flying High* in Japan. Prior to her employment with *Flying High*, she had worked as a flight attendant based in Hong Kong and as grand hostess at Narita Airport after her graduation from a flight attendant school in Tokyo. Eri was the only participant who had previously worked for another airline and she chose to leave her better-paid position with an Asian flagship carrier to work for *Flying High* because she was fed up with Hong Kong and had a positive image of Sydney from a previous visit. Despite her extensive experience in the sector, it was her dream to leave the tourism industry for a more rewarding sector and/or to start a family.

**Fumie** was 36 years old in 2008 and had lived in Australia since the age of 25, when she had arrived on a working holiday visa. At that time it had been her aim to improve her English and to live in a freer society away from Japan. Before joining *Flying High* in 2007, she had held a number of customer-service positions in the tourism industry in several cities in Australia. She had obtained permanent residency through a previous Australian partner and she is proud of the fact that she is often taken for an Australian native on the basis of her accent. She was happy

with the non-demanding nature of her job and had no further career goals. Her dream was to find a partner and start a family and she spoke at length about the difficulties of entering a stable relationship as a flight attendant, particularly for a budget airline.

Like Eri, **Juri** moved to Sydney because she had gained employment with *Flying High* in 2007 when she was 33 years old. However, this was not the first extended period she spent in Australia as she had spent most of her 20s travelling widely including extended periods of working holidays in Australia, France and New Zealand. During these travels she gained extensive work experience in the tourism industry, particularly as a tour guide, tour conductor and tour coordinator. In her early 30s, she had returned to Japan with the intention to settle down. However, her lack of networks and her age made it impossible for her to find a job in Tokyo and so she applied for a flight attendant job with *Flying High* when they advertised in Tokyo in 2007. Juri enjoyed the stress-free nature of her work and the fact that she got to see her family in Japan regularly. However, she feared that the physically demanding nature of the flight attendant job would mean that she would have to change careers again in the not-too-distant future.

At age 26, **Ryoko** was the youngest of our participants. Having failed to gain admission to a university in Japan, she came to Australia on a working holiday visa in 2001 at the age of 18. She travelled widely throughout Australia, mostly pursuing romantic interests, before she studied hospitality at college. After graduation, she worked in a Japanese restaurant and a five-star hotel before joining *Flying High* in 2007. Like other participants, she described her work as easy and stress-free but suffered from a sense of loneliness and the limited opportunities to form solid relationships afforded by the nature of shift work. She talked extensively about her dilemma of having achieved her life dreams of high fluency in English and a career as a flight attendant while, at the same time, feeling empty, lonely and dissatisfied. She had no sense of direction as to how that dilemma could be resolved.

**Takashi** is the only male among our participants. In 2008, he was 36 years old and had lived in Australia since 1997. At that time, he had quit his secure job at a major Japanese tourism service provider because he wanted to improve his English and enjoy a freer life-style than was available to gay men in Japan. After studying English at a language school for six months, he went on to obtain a diploma of tourism, held several tourism-related jobs, both in outback Australia and in Sydney, and, like Fumie, obtained permanent residency through an Australian partner, prior to joining *Flying High* in 2007. He was the only participant who actually spoke

about being inspired by *Stewardess Story* (see above). As male flight attendants are virtually non-existent in the Japanese airline industry, he never acted on his dream until he came to Australia. Like the gay US flight attendants interviewed by Hochschild (2003) in the 1980s, Takashi believes that gay men make ideal flight attendants because they are sensitive and caring, have good listening and conversational skills, a good sense of humor, and physical strength. Takashi was the only participant who was unambiguously committed to his work. He was extremely ambitious and in the 14 months he had been working for *Flying High* at the time of the interview, had managed to achieve promotion to in-flight trainer. He told us that he was one of the first-ever Asian flight attendants to achieve that level at *Flying High*.

There are a number of commonalities in our participants' profile. They all came of age and entered the job market after the Japanese bubble economy burst in 1989, and the 1990s, Japan's so-called "lost decade," must be considered their formative period. In Japan, their generation forms a distinct demographic variously described as パラサイトシングル ("parasite singles") or フリーター ("freeters"). "Parasite singles" is a generally negative term introduced by Yamada (1999) to refer to unmarried children who continue to live with and be dependent upon their parents well into their 20s or even 30s. The term "freeter," which is coined on the basis of English *free* and German *Arbeiter* ("worker"), by contrast, is a positive term referring to the same demographic of young adults who are not regularly employed but "pursue their dreams" by moving from one job to another. Both terms highlight the voluntary nature of being a "parasite single" or a "freeter." However, as Genda (2005) explains, even if this aimlessness may appear as free choice to individuals, the reality is that they have little other choice as jobs with structured career-progression that could lead to life-time employment have all but disappeared for this generation of Japanese. All our participants had worked a variety of jobs and, with the exception of Takashi, none was expecting to work for *Flying High* for an extended period – a "choice" that was inscribed in their 3-year employment contracts (2007-2009). Indeed, at Australian low-cost carriers the age of their crews grows slower than real-time or even goes down over time, evidencing high levels of turn-over and the replacement of crews with ever-younger entrants (Weller, 2008).

Our participants also have in common that, irrespective of whether they were hired in Japan (Eri, Juri, Ryoko) or in Australia (Fumie, Takashi), they had spent extended periods outside Japan, including Australia, prior to their employment with *Flying High*. They all

described the initial purpose of their peregrinations as improving their English and experiencing a more liberal society than Japan. None had left Japan with the intention to migrate permanently and, despite that fact that, at the time of our interview, Australia and Japan were the two most “fixed” locations in their lives, they all felt ready to move somewhere else if anything came up. Although they lacked deep local attachments, all of them considered a permanent residency (PR) visa in Australia a good thing to have. However, the short-term nature of their employment contracts meant that the only realistic way to obtain PR was in the family stream. Thus, again their “choice” to be spatially relatively free-floating was inscribed in institutional practices, where the Australian state and their employers “conspired” to make them permanently temporal.

In sum, the subjectivities of our participants “happily” coincide with the neoliberal corporate workplace where industrial relations seem to have disappeared as an issue. Their personal flexibility, which they largely experienced as pleasurable and liberating, coincided with the labor flexibility demanded of them and which they increasingly experienced as an obstacle to leading fulfilling lives as they grew older. As such, their pursuit of flexible lifestyles simply helps to consolidate the global capitalist system, which in turn serves to trap them in a progressively more precarious situation, as Song (2009) has observed for demographically similar Korean women.

In the following we will now focus on the actual interview data to further explore the intersections between language, mobility and institutions with reference to Japanese and English.

### ***The value of Japanese***

As part of its expansion strategy into the Asia-Pacific, *Flying High* advertised for Japanese-speaking flight attendants in 2007, both in Australia and Japan. 2007 was the first (and, at the time of writing in September 2011, the only) time *Flying High* recruited in Japan. For all our participants, those recruitment ads for Japanese-speaking flight attendants based in Australia appeared like a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Eri decided to apply because she was bored with life in Hong Kong and had a positive image of Australia, and particularly Sydney, from previous visits. Fumie applied because working as a flight attendant was a long-cherished dream of hers, which had literally been out of her reach until this opening. She figured (correctly) that her Japanese language skills would outweigh her small height. Most airlines used to have minimum

height requirements but with the emergence of low-cost carriers (and US anti-discrimination lawsuits) these have largely disappeared. Even so, for the job interview, Fumie wore paddings inside her shoes to make her look a bit taller. Juri, who had wished to settle down in Japan after her many years of travel and work overseas, applied because she could not find a job in Tokyo, and regular flight assignments to Japan would at least enable her to see her family periodically. Ryoko, too, was attracted by the prospect of being able to travel back and forth between Japan and Australia, as she feels attached to both locations. Additionally, being a flight attendant was the most prestigious customer service job she could imagine. Takashi, too, had held a life-long dream of becoming a flight attendant and feels grateful to *Flying High* that they made it possible and, specifically, that they do not discriminate against (gay) men.

Fumie and Takashi, who by that time both held permanent residency visas, applied in Sydney. Eri, Juri and Ryoko applied in Japan although only Juri resided in Japan at the time. When Eri and Ryoko were invited for an interview, they flew to Tokyo at their own expense from Hong Kong and Sydney, respectively. Job interviews were conducted in English in both these locations and none of the participants expressed any sense of anxiety about taking the interview in English. After all, they all had significant experience in English-speaking workplaces on top of many years of travel, English study and life in English-speaking environments. What worried them during the job interview then was the depth of their knowledge about *Flying High's* destinations, the quality of their customer service skills, and whether they had the personality and looks that they thought *Flying High* was looking for. The urgency they all felt to get the job and the sense of destiny was best expressed by Takashi, who told the interviewer: "My heart is already flying with *Flying High*!"

The fact that they were hired in different locations meant they received different employment contracts, based on different local-national employment legislation. We already discussed above how such location-based contracts have come under criticism with regard to Thai crews flying for *Jetstar*. While Thai labor laws are significantly weaker than Australian ones, the opposite is the case for Japan, and we suspect that that is the main reason why 2007 was *Flying High's* only hiring season in Japan. At AUD4,100 the monthly base salary of the participants hired in Japan was thus greater than that of those hired in Australia (AUD3,200). However, flight attendants hired in Japan were not eligible for an AUD800 Japanese language allowance while those hired in Australia were. In our participants' understanding, the language allowance at *Flying High* was

exclusive to Japanese and flight attendants with other languages or who spoke Japanese as an additional language were not eligible to receive a language allowance.<sup>vii</sup> In order to receive the language allowance, Fumie and Takashi had to sit a Japanese language test and thus formally prove their proficiency by achieving a certificate of *Nihongo Kentei* Level 6. Those hired in Japan, by contrast, did not have to have their Japanese certified. However, they had to have their English tested as a minimum score of 680 on the TOEIC was a requirement for being hired in Japan but not in Australia.

Ultimately, the salary and conditions of those of our participants hired in Australia and those hired in Japan were quite similar. When we asked them how they felt about their salaries (which were further increased by an overnight allowance of AUD150), all participants indicated they were happy. Given the high cost of living and particularly accommodation in Sydney, they could not save but, as they were all single and without financial commitments such as a mortgage, they felt their wages enabled them to live a relatively carefree life. They had taken out insurance against various emergencies and misfortunes, and did not dwell on the fact that they were not able to save or build any equity for their old age. What discomfited them was the fact that they were aware of the low wages that their co-workers hired in other Asian countries received. They spoke about trying to hide their salary levels from those co-workers, who they thought had to work much harder to pull in less than half of what they earned. So, their satisfaction with their remuneration and conditions was not only an expression of the kind of life that their work allowed them to live but also an expression of the pressure and naked fear that the presence of under-paid colleagues doing exactly the same work created. The presence of “cheap labor” made them feel sorry, worried and slightly guilty, as is evident in this quote from Eri:

Eri: 結構タイ人の子達やっぱ出来る子多いから。日本語。元日本の航空会社で働いていたとか多いんですよね。だから結構日本の日本語でサービスする事たたくこまれてる人達が多くなって。関わらず、もう過酷な労働条件の下、ほんとにだからチープレイバーって言ったらチープレイバーなんですよええ。

Eri: Many Thai crew members are capable of speaking Japanese. Many used to work for a Japanese airline where they were strictly trained in customer service in Japanese. Still, they have to put up with such hard working conditions. Really, they are cheap labor.

They found it particularly unsettling that those underpaid Asians also spoke Japanese (but did not get a language allowance) and were also familiar with the Japanese style of customer service, which they uniformly considered superior to the Australian or Western style. The Japanese language and Japanese style of customer service were the two key areas where they unambiguously added value to *Flying High*. And yet, there, too, they were replaceable because, the advertising rhetoric notwithstanding, quality did not really matter at *Flying High*, as Juri explained.

Juri: いっぱいいる。レジメに。日本の航空会社で働いていた人たちとかいるから。でも、もうほんっとたかが知れてるから。日本の会社とコードシェアとかに乗せたら、だから多分それは、後々問題に。

KT: あ、ほ~んとに。喋れないの？

Juri: お飲み物は何に致しましょう？オレンジジュース。アップルジュース。みたいな。なんか問題があったら解決できるっていう事では。

Juri: In their resume, many Thai crew members include their work experience with a Japanese airline. But, it's not that good at all. If they fly on a code-share flight with a Japanese airline, problems arise.

KT: Oh really? They can't speak Japanese well?

Juri: "What would you like to drink?" Like, "Orange juice or apple juice?" Not at the level of proficiency where they could solve problems.

However, the threat of being undercut was not only coming from the natives of poorer Asian countries. As we said above, *Flying High* hired in Japan only once. However, from 2008 onwards *Flying High* began to hire Japanese nationals through another Southeast Asian country, at conditions local to that country. While a more prosperous nation than Thailand, the base salary there is still significantly lower than the minimum wage in either Australia or Japan. To be undercut by about 60% by younger Japanese with a similar profile made them feel disposable and was only possible because of the widely circulating discourses about the desirability of flight attendant work, as Takashi explained.

Takashi: 結局、どんなに給料低くっても「あたしフライトアテンダントになりたい！」っていう若い日本人の女の子は数知れないでしょ？だから、いかにこれから会社に自分が貴重な存在になれるかだね。

Takashi: After all, no matter how low the salary is, there are endless numbers of young Japanese women who would say “I want to be a flight attendant!” So, it’s important to be seen as an asset to the company from now on.

Thus, despite the fact that they had been hired for their Japanese language skills and their experience in Japanese-style customer service they felt that they would never be able to add enough value to *Flying High* to consider themselves worthy. Rather, they felt expendable.

Eri: でも私じゃなくてもいい訳じゃないですか？要は仕事に関して言うならば、エアラインってどこもそうでしょうけど、誰か個人を必要として回ってる会社ってどこもないんですよね。きっと... 特にフライトアテンダントなんて、若くてなりたい人もいっぱいいるし。だから、ね、それこそ誰でもできる仕事だと思うし、そういうのでね、私ってほんとに必要とされてるんだろうか？とかふと思ったり。

Eri: But it doesn’t have to be me, does it? In terms of my job, there is no airline or company that needs one particular person. For sure, flight attendant jobs are in demand as there are many young women who want to be a flight attendant. I think anyone can do this job, and that’s why I sometimes wonder if I’m ever needed.

We now turn from Japanese as a selection criterion in the hiring process to the ways in which the participants’ identities as Japanese placed them regularly in difficult positions as the expectations of Japanese customers clashed with the services provided by *Flying High*. As “designated” Japanese flight attendants, our participants were most frequently rostered on flights to and from Japanese destinations. Also, if there were problems with Japanese customers, our participants were usually assigned to deal with them. This placed them regularly in a difficult position as there was a clear mismatch between Japanese customer expectations and *Flying High* service provisions, and our participants were acutely aware that *Flying High* was falling short by Japanese standards. As a result, they often had to bear the brunt of Japanese customers’ anger, as in this example offered by Ryoko.



Ryoko: お前日本人でねえだろう。俺も会社立ち上げてやってきてるけど、お前らみたいはどうたらこうたら、日本人として恥ずかしくねえのか。みたいな感じで。私は日本人代表じゃないけど@@@<sup>viii</sup> 会社代表じゃないけど@@@勝手に代表にされて日本人である事で。

Ryoko: He went like “You are not Japanese! I run a business, but you all are blah, blah, blah. Aren’t you ashamed of yourself? Aren’t you ashamed to call yourself Japanese?” I was like, “I don’t represent Japan.” @@@. I don’t represent my company either @@@. He made me a representative just because I’m Japanese.

Their most common response to such incidents was “to let them wash over” and ignore them. Ryoko said it was her “personal policy” to do only as much as she was paid for, as does Juri.

Juri: もうあえてその努力をしてサービスやってます、っていうのは全く。私だから、とにかくうちの会社っていい加減だからその...毛布、オーバーナイトフライトなのに毛布がないとか。それを謝る時にやっぱりすごいね、せっかくお金出してくれてるのにやっぱりお客さんにも文句があるから、そんな時あれだけ。でもまあ私のせいじゃないし@@@

Juri: I don’t make an extra effort in customer service because our company is so slack. Sometimes, we don’t even have enough blankets on overnight flights. I know customers are upset because they paid for it, and we have to apologize. But it’s not really my fault@@@.

Although they understood that they were specifically in charge of Japanese customers, another strategy to deal with the mismatch between the high expectations of Japanese customers and their institutionalized inability to meet those expectations was to refer any complaints to Australian colleagues, as Juri explained.

Juri: また言葉が通じるから日本人変な所でごねると思うし。だからいつも何か問題があったらオージーを連れて来て。外人に弱い日本人じゃないけど、... 外人をガンっと連れてきて、その人がペラペラ話してそれを訳して、「こういっておりますが」っていうと収まるの... なのでもう日本、日本にしない方がいい。このもうオージ

ー！オーストラリア！みたいな。これの雰囲気。雰囲気を味わって@@@帰れるから。

Juri: Japanese customers get more difficult with us because we have the common language. That's why I bring in an Aussie when a problem happens. Japanese are scared of foreigners. I bring in a foreigner, and she will speak English and I translate it. Things get settled when I translate and say "This is what she's telling you." So, we shouldn't do it the Japanese way. Like, "These are Aussies! This is Australia! That's the experience." They can go home with the experience of Australia.

In sum, Japanese language skills had a distinct value when it came to getting the job. At the same time, having been hired primarily on the basis of their Japanese proficiency resulted in a strong sense of job insecurity as other Japanese speakers were seen as being able to do the same job at ever cheaper rates, depending on where they would be based. The delinking of language and nationality/territory must thus be considered a way to devalue the commodity value of Japanese. Additionally, the value of Japanese proficiency and Japanese-style customer service was of limited value beyond job entry because the conditions at *Flying High* were such that it was simply impossible to meet the high expectations of Japanese customers. While our participants dealt with this potentially stressful situation by "letting it wash over" and by only doing as much as they were paid, they experienced considerable anxiety when it came to English, as we will explain in the next section.

### ***The burden of English***

All our participants stressed repeatedly that the linguistic demands of their work – both in Japanese and English – were well below their proficiency levels. Prior to joining *Flying High*, they had all been led to believe that English proficiency levels for flight attendant work would have to be high but to their dismay, tinged with relief, they found that all that was needed was to be able to ask "Chicken or beef?" and "Apple or orange?" That is how all of them caricatured the linguistic demands of their work to us. Nonetheless, English proved to be stressful for them – not because of the proficiency levels needed to do the job but because of *Flying High's* English-Only policy.

Passengers on *Flying High*'s international flights are served by multi-national teams consisting of Australians, Japanese, and other Asian nationals. With the exception of the provision of service to customers from the same national/linguistic background (e.g., Japanese flight attendant attending to Japanese customer), it is *Flying High* policy that all communication on board must be in English. Our participants found this policy particularly burdensome when it came to communicating with other Japanese crew members: while they were encouraged to speak Japanese to Japanese customers, they were prohibited from speaking Japanese to Japanese co-workers. In fact, the English-Only policy extended to their time off-board, too, as it applies when- and where-ever they are in uniform.

Ryoko: そういうもうあからさまにするマネージャーとかもいますし[...]ユニフォームだって覚えてる?みたいな感じで、ユニフォームだし英語で喋ってね。他のお客さんとかもいるから。とか。ユニフォーム着てる間はお客さんからみたら *Flying High* だって思われてるから、*Flying High* のクルーとしてちゃんとやっぱり、そういう風にして。

Ryoko: Some managers make it clear [...] like, "Remember you are wearing the uniform." "Speak English all the time when in uniform." And like, "Customers are always around." "When in uniform, customers identify you as representing *Flying High*." "Remember you represent *Flying High* as its crew member."

All our participants found it inconvenient and bothersome to speak to Japanese colleagues in English and confessed to breaking the English-Only policy when no Australians were around. They would switch to English as soon as an Australian came into sight (or earshot). They observed the same behavior with other Asian crew-members, i.e. Japanese broke the rule in the presence of Thai, for instance, who also felt free to speak Thai to other Thai crew members in the presence of the Japanese but not in the presence of Australians. All participants confessed to this kind of illicit code-switching and, as a result, found – or felt – themselves under heightened linguistic surveillance. Ryoko, for instance, spoke about the feeling of being watched, particularly as she thought it was rude to respond in English if someone addressed her in Japanese.

Ryoko: あ、そういう時は日本語で喋ってますけど。でも感じる、オージーとかが、ああ見てるなあみたいな。で、そうするとやっぱちょっとして注意されたりとか。

Ryoko: Well, I speak back to them in Japanese. But I feel it. The Aussies are watching us. Then we get warned later.

All our participants claimed that being dobbed in by Australian co-workers for violating the English-Only rule was common. Any reported violation affected not only their reputation but also their performance review, including their promotion prospects. According to our participants, there are two levels of promotional opportunities for flight attendants at *Flying High*: flight attendants can become in-flight trainers (a status only Takashi had achieved) and beyond that crew supervisor. While Takashi aspired to become a crew supervisor, Eri, Fumie, Juri and Ryoko were convinced that any promotion was out of their reach. An in-flight trainer is someone to whom new flight attendants are assigned for the first few weeks of their work for on-the-job training. A crew supervisor's duties include overseeing the crew of flight attendants on any given flight, making in-flight announcements, trouble-shooting, dealing with customer complains, communicating with pilots, and writing flight reports. Our participants said that almost all in-flight trainers and crew supervisors were Australian. Indeed, Takashi prided himself on being only one of a handful of Asian in-flight trainers at *Flying High*. The reason the women initially gave for their lack of aspirations was that they felt that their English would not be enough to handle communication in an emergency situation. Given their obvious high proficiency levels this seemed surprising and when we probed further, they also confided that English was a terrain where race was played out. Juri, for instance, felt alienated because there were no Asians in managerial positions.

Juri: 上がね オーストラリア人。ま、だからまあそういう所でなんかこう、差別的なものじゃないけど、あ、やっぱり私達って第2外国人だなあみたいな。まあそれは感じますよね。

Juri: People in management are all Australian. That makes us feel discriminated, feeling like we are second class foreigners. That's what I feel.

When they said they did not have the English for managerial positions, they really seemed to say that they did not have authority in situations of interracial conflict, as Fumie explains.

Fumie: で、あのう、私、正直マネージングスキルあると思うですよ。あのうマネージングもやってたし、日本でも。管理能力は全然できると思うんですけど、でも、やりたくないんですね。なぜそう思うかっていうと、管理できないから。っていうよりも、やっぱりそのネイティグイングリッシュスピーカーじゃないので、[...] で、しかもオーストラリアの会社で一番最初全部アナウンスとかは、全部マネージャーがやるんですよ。”Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. Welcome to ブラブラー”、とかっつって。”

KT: うん。全然できるじゃない！

Fumie: 違う、違う。でも出来るんですけど、でもやっぱりネイティブじゃない。オーストラリアのネイティブじゃない。やっぱりアクセントは絶対にあるし、で、やっぱりその緊急のエマージェンシーになった時のやっぱりそこまであれだけども、でも、やっぱり緊急時のそうやっぱ人の命とか... うちらはやっぱりサービス要員の前に保安要員なんですよ。complaint のハンドルはできない事もないかもしれない。多分できると思う。普通の complaint も対応してるから。だけれども、多分 big complaint か何かあった時にじゃ、オージーのね下のクルーの子が complaint になって、じゃあマネージャー出せて私がぼへんって行った所で、はあ？ってやっぱり。無きにしも非ずなんですよ。

Fumie: I think I have good management skills. I used to be a manager, too, in Japan. I am capable of managing, but I don't want to do it. Because I won't be able to manage. Or more like because I'm not a native English speaker. [...] also, managers have to do the announcements, like “Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. Welcome to blah, blah, blah.”

KT: You can do that!

Fumie: No, no. Well, I could. But I'm not a native speaker. Not an Australian native speaker. I definitely have an accent, and in case of an emergency. We are safety providers first before we are customer service staff. Maybe I can handle *complaints*, too. Probably, I can. I have been able to manage *complaints* so far. But in case of *big complaints*, and an Australian subordinate receives a *complaint*, a manager gets called in, and I show up, it would be like “What?!” That's not an unlikely scenario.

That Fumie is right and the scenario is not unlikely at all is confirmed by Takashi, who describes how Australian trainees sometimes refuse to accept Asian in-flight trainers. He himself had at that point only ever trained one trainee, an Asian, and so wasn't speaking about his personal experience.

Takashi: だから多分、アジア人の人から習いたくない人も多いんだと思う。オージークルーの人はね。でもやっぱりアジア人クルーに習うと、結構あのお後でコンプレインしている新人の子もいる。...日本人とか言わないけどね。オージーの人は言う。はっきり言う。

KT: はあ〜。未だにあるのか。

Takashi: あるある。[...] うん。なんで英語もろくに喋れんのに習うのか?っていうのもあるのね。

Takashi: Many don't want to be trained by Asians. Particularly Australian crew members. New recruits complain if they are trained by an Asian crew member. Japanese don't. Australians don't hesitate to complain.

KT: Something like that still happens, huh?

Takashi: Yeah, yeah, [...] Like, "How come I have to be trained by someone who can't speak English properly?" It's like that.

White Australian co-workers are not the only ones having reportedly difficulties dealing with Asian managers. Our participants repeatedly told us stories of White Australian customers refusing to accept the authority of Asian flight attendants, complaining about their English, or pointing out their visibility. Consequently, only relatively small contingents of Asian flight attendants were rostered on routes that mostly carried Australian holiday makers. Our participants were regretful that this practice limited their opportunity to fly to "fun" destinations such as Bali or Hawaii.

In sum, "English" is a key site of contestation over the identity of what it means to work for an "Australian" airline. As we said earlier, the Australian-ness – just as the Asian-ness – of *Flying High* is mostly a discursive construction and only to a lesser degree a material reality.

“English” is a terrain where that discursive construction is achieved. *Flying High*'s English-Only policy makes the airline look (or sound) Australian. However, no matter how good their English, speaking English cannot erase the embodied identities of our participants as Asians, and, implicitly as “non-Australian.” This finding is in line with our observation elsewhere that, in multicultural Australia where race has become unmentionable, “English proficiency” has come to serve as code for race (Piller & Takahashi, 2011a, 2011b).

## **Conclusion**

In this paper we have explored the selection processes played out on the terrain of Japanese and English in a prototypically mobile, neoliberal workplace, namely a low-cost airline operating in the Asia-Pacific. Flight attendant work for low-cost carriers such as the airline we have named *Flying High* is low-skilled, physically demanding, increasingly poorly paid and offering hardly any structured further training or career progression. Nonetheless, many discourses – both fictional and non-fictional – conspire to maintain the flight-attendant glamour of a by-gone era. Consequently, aspiring candidates have to invest heavily to gain entry into this job. Our participants all had invested many years of their lives in perfecting their English and their customer service skills to the levels that made them eligible to be considered for work with *Flying High*. Despite their substantial investment, the rewards were meager and, in terms of career progression, the job seemed for all except one the end of the road. The best hope our female participants had was to find a partner and start a family so as to escape their dead-end job. The fact that the men they met in the course of their work were undesirable and that shift work limited their opportunities to meet potential partners outside work, was a source of considerable anxiety for the women.

In addition to desire for English and the West that shaped their careers prior to gaining entry to work at *Flying High*, it was their proficiency in Japanese that was most immediately relevant during the selection process. They were employed by *Flying High* because their linguistic, cultural, national and racial identities offered a fit with *Flying High*'s expansion strategy into Asian markets, particularly the Japanese market. At the same time, the recognition that they had been hired for their generic identity attributes rather than their personal achievements served to instill a sense of precariousness and insecurity. It was a constant reminder that there were many

younger competitors with exactly the same attributes who could be hired in locations with lower wages and less stringent labor laws than Japan and Australia.

Finally, while their identities as Asians and as speakers of Japanese were an asset for *Flying High* internationally, they were a liability within Australia. The company's English-Only policy can be understood as a way of holding on to an "Australian" identity while being a multinational corporation that conducts different parts of its operations in whichever location generates the most profit for that particular aspect of the operation. As such, it seems to us that language and identity work in the context we have explored here is best understood as entirely subject to the profit motive.

We close by noting a large black spot in our data and our analysis: our participants saw themselves through the lenses of language, culture, nation, location and race and it was these aspects of their identities that enabled them to gain work as flight attendants and to perform that work well; it was also these identities that were remunerated and where they experienced inclusion and exclusion. What is strikingly absent from our data are our participants' class identities and their identities as workers. We contend that the success of the neoliberal multinational corporation is to a large degree built on identity politics and their moral relativism while rendering class struggles and labor activism built on worker solidarity not only invisible but unimaginable.

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## Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> [http://detail.chiebukuro.yahoo.co.jp/qa/question\\_detail/q1111062826](http://detail.chiebukuro.yahoo.co.jp/qa/question_detail/q1111062826); accessed on 2011/09/15.

<sup>ii</sup> <http://allabout.co.jp/gm/gc/294698/>; accessed on 2011/09/15.

<sup>iii</sup> E.g., <http://www.ca-style.jp/> or <http://www.airline.ecc.jp/>; accessed on 2011/09/15.

<sup>iv</sup> <http://www.aviationstudycentre.com/cabincrew.htm>; accessed on 2011/09/15.

<sup>v</sup> See <http://www.travelvision.jp/news/detail.php?id=48962> and [http://www.his-j.com/tyo/group/2011mh\\_cabinattendant/](http://www.his-j.com/tyo/group/2011mh_cabinattendant/) for details; accessed on 2011/09/15.

<sup>vi</sup> Funded by a Macquarie University Research Development Grant. We also gratefully acknowledge the research assistance provided by Kyoko Kanda.

<sup>vii</sup> Formally, the requirement for the language allowance was to be able to pass the Japanese language test *Nihongo Kentei* at Level 6. Practically, this meant that only native speakers of Japanese were eligible because *Nihongo Kentei* is a Japanese-language test aimed at native speakers. It is primarily formal levels of Japanese, including the number of *kanji*, that are being tested. See <http://www.nihongokentei.jp/> for details; accessed on 2011/09/15.

<sup>viii</sup> @ indicates laughter.