Linguistic Microaggression
Native Speaker Bias and Monolingual Bias in Japanese-English Code-switching
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Code-switching is described as a resource for multilingual speakers to display their identities, language preferences, and linguistic competence. Code-switching can be affiliative or rapport-building, especially when used in language play. Researchers also advocate for viewing code-switching as translanguaging, in which, rather than alternation between two discrete languages, code-switching-as-translanguaging is part of an integrated linguistic repertoire. However, these depictions are inadequate to explain how L2-Japanese speakers in Japan react to unwanted code-switching.

This paper comes from a larger study of code-switching and L2-Japanese speakers in Japan and focuses on a subset of participants who shared negative views of code-switching. Using qualitative thematic analysis, I examine reasons for respondents’ strong and sometimes emotional reactions to unwanted code-switching. Some respondents rejected code-switching as a negative message about their Japanese ability or outsider status. Others treated code-switching as a “contest” and felt victorious when Japanese interlocutors reverted to Japanese. In addition, some respondents revealed stereotypes about the English ability of L1-Japanese speakers and described leveraging their status as English native speakers to gain the upper hand against their Japanese interlocutors. While they rejected implications that “foreigners can’t speak Japanese,” they also demonstrated a lack of acceptance of anything other than “perfect” English and aligned with stereotypes depicting Japanese people as “bad at English.”

While researchers argue that code-switching-as-translanguaging allows multilingual speakers to use their full linguistic repertoire, my findings complicate this view. My analysis shows that some L2-Japanese speakers subscribe to a monolingual bias and have expectations that “Japanese conversations should stay in Japanese.” These beliefs privilege native speakers and reject the kind of language mixing endorsed by translanguaging scholars.