"But your face, it looks like English”: Exploring language, race, and identity with multilingual Japanese-Canadian children in Montreal

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Quebec’s official monolingual French language policy (Bill 101) neatly divides people into 3 linguistic categories: Francophone, Anglophone, and Allophone (speakers of languages other than French or English). These categories mask considerable linguistic diversity, especially in Montreal, the city in North America with the highest rate of trilingualism. They also disavow the visible, or racialized aspects of identity. However, it appears that identity for multilingual youth in Montreal is shaped by the intersections of the subject-as-heard and the subject-as-seen (Sarkar, Low, & Winer, 2007). Taking a social approach to multilingualism and drawing on language policy and critical race theory scholarship, I developed LangCrit (Critical Language and Race Theory). This is a critical theoretical lens for multilingualism research in Quebec, where issues of race have been swept under discussions of language.

I engaged in a qualitative and exploratory case study inquiry with 4 multilingual Japanese-Canadian children, ages 4 to 6, in their homes in Montreal. These young children demonstrate a keen sense of what languages are appropriate to use with whom and where. These ideas seem to be shaped by their impressions of not only what language one speaks (subject-as-heard), but also how they look (subject-as-seen). The children use this knowledge to language flexibly as they follow or resist social expectations for language use. In this presentation, I will discuss implications of LangCrit and methodological implications of doing research with young children for sociolinguistic research on multilingualism.


Keywords: identity, race, multilingualism.