Crossing the boundaries between community adults and children: Pakistani pupils’ use of ‘migrant’ Japanese

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Researches have revealed that migrant children, who are fluent in the majority language, skillfully use the ‘migrant’ variety of it to negotiate social relations and challenge existing hierarchies (Rampton 1995, Hinnenkamp 2003, Jaspers 2011). Using approaches from linguistic ethnography, this paper studies the use of ‘migrant’ Japanese by Pakistan-born bilingual pupils in a mosque complementary school in a Tokyo suburb. I sound-recorded natural interaction in the complementary school classes in two different periods, approximately two years apart. One was when the pupils were aged 8-12, the other, between 10 and 14.

Close analysis shows that the ways in which the pupils used the ‘migrant’ Japanese differed between the two periods. The pupils used the variety towards the male community teacher who did not perceive the difference between the standard Japanese and the ‘migrant’ form. In the earlier period, it was used to assert their opinions by ‘standing on an equal ground’, metaphorically evoking the power and authority the elder generation display. Later, such instances were mainly phatic. In both periods, the variety indexed their elder generation whose power and authority within the community the pupils tried to challenge.

As Urdu was hardly used in conflict situations, it is likely that the pupils avoided ‘direct’ challenges by choosing to use subtle linguistic differences. However, there were more jokes shared by and with the teacher in the later period, suggesting the pupils’ age may have played a part in such different types of crossing.

Keywords: linguistic ethnography, complementary school, crossing.