

The Languages Spoken in the Nippo-Brazilian Rural Communities of the State of São Paulo and the Perceptions of Three Generations about the “Languages Mixture”

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It is presumed that the Nippo-Brazilian (or Nikkei) population in Brazil numbers some 1,400,000. This corresponds to 52.7% of all persons of Japanese descent who live outside Japan, according to the data of 2007,¹ and it makes the Brazilian contingent the biggest in any country where Japanese people and their descendants are present except Japan itself. In 2008, the centennial of the arrival of the *Kasato-maru* at Santos harbor—and of Japanese immigration in Brazil—many aspects of this Nippo-Brazilian community are being discussed, starting with their immigration history and including such things as their trajectory into the country as immigrants, their economic activities, and their penetration of Brazilian society.

One aspect of Japanese immigration that requires our attention is the language of the immigrants and their descendants. The contact of the Japanese language, brought by the immigrants that were born in Japan, with the Portuguese, the official language of Brazil, has resulted in a language called “*koronia-go*” (colony language) or “Nisei-go” (Nisei language), introduced by such previous works as Andō (1956), Handa (1970), Mase (1987), Nawa (1988), and Kuyama (2000). *Koronia-go* is a variant of the Japanese language in which we see clearly the interference of the Portuguese language, from the lexical borrowing to the codes changes.

This chapter has as its purpose to draw attention to some relevant data about the linguistic behavior of speakers of two rural communities of the State of São Paulo, persons from the first to the third generation. The data was collected in the first phase of a research project carried out by researchers from Osaka University and Brazilian universities in 2003. An integral part of the Humanities Interface Project—Center of Excellence (COE) Program of the Osaka University, the census was taken with the aim of obtaining linguistic data from the different generations of immigrants and their descendants in the Nippo-Brazilian communities. For the project accomplishment, two rural communities of the State of São Paulo were selected, communities in which the inhabitants are Japanese immigrants and their descendants. Vila Ipelândia, called Fukuhaku-mura in Japanese, is situated near the capital, and Comunidades Aliança (Alliance Communities), which embraces the Primeira Aliança (First Alliance), Segunda Aliança (Second Alliance), and Terceira Aliança (Third Alliance), is in the countryside, distant from the capital.

Vila Ipelândia, 34 Km (21 miles) from the capital, is located in the city of Suzano, now in the greenbelt area of the capital suburban region, and had 512 inhabitants in the census 2002.² Comunidades Aliança is situated in the city of Mirandópolis, in the southwest region of the state, 580 km (360 miles) from the capital, near the border with the State of Mato Grosso do Sul, and had 644 inhabitants. Both are relatively old communities, founded between 1926 and 1931, before the

period of World War II.³

The project was divided into two phases: the first consisted of the application of a questionnaire with 68 questions about personal data, Japanese and Portuguese language learning, self-estimate of their linguistic proficiency in the two languages, the languages spoken with the family members, and the perception about the languages in use; the second was dedicated to the recording of the interviews with the informants, in reduced number. For the first phase of the research, 219 informants were selected, 108 from Vila Ipelândia, and 111 from Aliança. Segmented by generation, 80 interviewees were of the first generation (those who were born in Japan), 83 of the second generation, and 56 of the third generation (isseis, niseis, and sanseis, respectively). All the informants responded to the questionnaire, and their answers were recorded by the interviewers.⁴

The ages of the three generations vary, but the ages that predominated among the isseis were from 74 to 83 years old (42%); among the niseis, from 54 to 63 years old (36.1%); and among the sanseis, from 24 to 33 years old (42.9%). We might characterize the age of the isseis as ripe, as contrasted with the sanseis, who are youthful.

In an earlier presentation based on this research data, a colleague and I broached the subject of the relationship between the fields of action and the generations (Ota & Gardenal, 2006). To the question “Which language(s) was (were) spoken by your family when you were a child?” the average of the niseis in the two communities who answered “Japanese” or “More Japanese” was 72.3%.⁵ In response to the question which language(s) was (were) spoken at family dinners at the time the questionnaire was administered, 42.9% gave the same answer. Otherwise, in the sansei familiar context, our survey results evidenced little use of the Japanese language in infancy, and still less at the time the research was being conducted: 19.6% when they were children, and 14.3% on the questionnaire occasion. Still, it is worth underlining that, on the interview occasion, 19.6% answered that they spoke “Half Japanese, half Portuguese” in the familiar context, 26.8% said “More Portuguese,” and 39.3% affirmed that they used Portuguese. These numbers are evidence that speech in Japanese or the predominance of Japanese has declined from the second to the third generation, giving more space to the Portuguese, with a higher percentage, followed by the speech with the predominance of the Portuguese, and then the presence of the two languages in the speech.

The isseis, those who were born in Japan and whose average age upon arrival in Brazil was fourteen, were not questioned about which language(s) they used in the family context when they were children; it was supposed that 100% or the majority of the answers would be “Japanese.” However, the number of the isseis in the two communities who answered “Japanese” or “More Japanese” when asked what they spoke in family situations at the time of the research was 64.9%. This shows clearly that the family context is already very different from the time when the informants were children, as the companionship of those who speak less Japanese makes the Portuguese more present in the speeches.

In this chapter, I intend to focus on the informants’ answers to questions 67 and 68 of the first phase of the project, about the mixture of Japanese and Portuguese in their quotidian exchanges with relatives or friends, and I will pay especial attention to discriminating among the generations. Doi (2007) has analyzed the same topic, focusing, in general, on the favorable opinions about the

mixture of the two languages, and the different motivations for informants' adoption of language mixture. Here I will deal with the informants' answers, linking them with each of the generations.

To question 67, interviewees were instructed to answer with one of three alternatives: *Yes*, *No*, or *I don't know*. The following tables show responses. Tables 1 and 2 present the numbers indicating the informants' answers related to each community, followed by the table 3, which presents the average of the two communities.

Question 67: Do you mix the Japanese and Portuguese language when you talk to your family or Nikkei friends?

Table 1: The three generations of Aliança:

	Isseis	Niseis	Sanseis
Yes	75.6%	90.5%	82.1%
No	22.0%	9.5%	17.9%
I don't know	2.4%	---	---

Table 2: The three generations of the Vila Ipelândia:

	Isseis	Niseis	Sanseis
Yes	76.9%	97.6%	85.7%
No	23.1%	2.4%	14.3%
I don't know	---	---	---

Table 3: The average of the two communities:

	Isseis	Niseis	Sanseis	Average
Yes	76.3%	94.0%	83.9%	84.9%
No	22.5%	6.0%	16.1%	14.6%
I don't know	1.3%	---	---	0.5%

Based on University of Osaka data, 2004.

Comparing Tables 1 and 2, we observe that Aliança and Vila Ipelândia present very similar numbers for the generations, demonstrating points in common, with the highest percentage of the affirmative answers observed among the niseis, followed by sanseis, and then by isseis. The niseis' answers affirm that mixing of the two languages was predominant, with the average of 94% attesting the clear conscience they have with regard to the languages mixture in their speech. On the other hand, the sanseis' positive answer, that comes in second place, registers 83.9% of the informants, and the isseis with positive answer are 76.3%. The average of the total of the informants who affirmed that they mix the two languages is, then, 84.9%, against 14.6% who said they do not do that.

Even taking into account that it measures the self-estimate of the informants, it is interesting to observe the expressive number of those who are conscious of the mixture of the two languages in daily conversation with their relatives in the community, which leads us to conclude that a conversation in which Japanese and Portuguese languages are mixed is a reality in the quotidian lives of the majority of the informants in the two rural communities researched, occurring more in the

niseis' speeches than in the other two generations'.

The informants' opinion about the languages mixture was required in Question 68.

Question 68: What do you think of mixing the Japanese and Portuguese languages?

Unlike the previous question, which presupposed one of three alternatives as an answer, Question 68 is open-ended and allows us to know the opinion of each of the informants as well as to estimate the degree of perception or consciousness of their own speech or others' speech.

Considering the numbers presented in Question 67, we might form the hypothesis that the niseis are more disposed than the other generations to accept the mixture of the two languages. Niseis answered that they mix Japanese and Portuguese more, followed by sanseis and then by the isseis who when they were children lived in a family ambience in which Japanese was the predominant language spoken. However, the results of the survey as shown in numbers calculated by Doi (2007) do not confirm this hypothesis. Besides, according to Doi, positive estimates of language mixture (including the answers of the informants who accept it with a certain conformity) average 74% among the isseis, followed by sanseis with 60%, and finally niseis with 54%. Acceptance of language mixture is presented in the table below:

Table 4: Acceptance of language mixture:

	Isseis	Niseis	Sanseis	Average
Yes	67.7%	57.8%	78.2%	66.3%
No	80.0%	50.0%	41.6%	57.4%
I don't know	73.7%	53.8%	59.5%	61.8%

Based on the table in Doi, 2007.

The average of the three generations of the two communities that have a favorable position on the practice of language mixture, about 62% (as opposed to only 38% that have a negative opinion), is significant. Analyzing the approval motives of the 62% of the informants, Doi affirms that "justifications of pragmatic sense" are prevalent, such as "convenience and facility for the communication among the speakers." She identifies six main motivations of those who approve the languages mixture practice, analyzing each of these motivations and exemplifying them with the informants' declarations:

- a) "a means of communication";
- b) "a result of the incompetence in the involved languages";
- c) "a way of accommodating to the interlocutor speech";
- d) "an adaptation to the Brazilian context";
- e) "an expression of affectionate nature"; and
- f) "an expression of the Brazilian Nikkei's identity" (Doi, 2007: 248-52).

I would like, in this chapter, to try to draw a profile of each of the generations, pointing out favorable attitudes as well as unfavorable ones with reference to the language mixture, and giving examples of the informants' opinions.⁶ In the following discussion, the data enclosed in square

brackets after each informants' declaration, indicate, first, their provenance by an abbreviation (A for Aliança, and I for Vila Ipelândia), followed by the abbreviation of the sex (M for masculine, and F for feminine), the age of the informant, and after the hyphen, position in the birth order of his or her generation/community. For example, (IF57-100) indicates that the informant is from Vila Ipelândia, a female, 57 years old, and number 100 in the list of members of her generation.

Isseis: The opinions that it is natural or normal to mix the two languages predominate: "It is common to mix. It is habitual and natural" (IM53-10); many of them also affirm that the use of the two languages in the same speech is unconscious.

Facility of communication is another explanation: "I can speak (in Japanese) without mix, but everybody understands better when I use the most familiar words (in Portuguese). If I change to the Japanese, they don't understand" (AM73-55), proving in this case that the aim of mixture is to accommodate the interlocutor who does not have enough proficiency to understand speech exclusively in Japanese. Other answers about the adaptation of the speech to the interlocutor: "Since the Japanese is difficult, it is natural the unknown words are spoken in Portuguese" (AM82-8); "When I talk to young people, I mix the words in Portuguese for the names of objects. It has naturally become so" (IM85-26). In these opinions, it is clear that the language mixture is an option that takes into account the interlocutor, and not the speaker's needs.

In Doi's research, the numerical data on answers to Question 68 include those who answered "It's hopeless" (*shikata ga nai*), a position that can be characterized as conformist or as passive acceptance, given the reality that surrounds the informant: "Since I am in Brazil, it is hopeless (I mix)" (IM74-68); "I think it would be better if they spoke only in Japanese, but it's hopeless. I think they mix because they don't know (determinate words)" (IF76-20).

This position differs from that of others who express favorable opinions about the language mixture, emphasizing its quality: "The daily use of *koronia-go* is good. It's a familiar language" (AM71-4); "If it is *koronia-go*, we can speak in a relaxed way. It's a familiar and warm language . . . without the complexity of the treatment language" (IM73-98), defining in this way the *koronia-go*, comparing it with the Japanese language: "The talk becomes more harmonious" (IM79-40); "Japanese mixed with Portuguese is like a dialect" (AM70-46); "Japanese pronunciation is a little hard, but the *koronia-go* becomes more melodious with the mixture of Portuguese" (AM60-86), defining each one the colony language. "The *koronia-go* was born from the necessity of the society/group of the immigrants. I don't understand the dialects of Okinawa, Aomori, and Kagoshima. In other words, *koronia-go* is the common language of the Nikkeis" (IM66-96). Associated with these opinions is a feeling of "belonging" to a group with the same history and reality, a linguistic community within which speakers share a form of thinking and feeling expressed in the language they speak: "The old Nikkeis mix a lot (the languages). It's common to speak the words in Portuguese or Japanese" (IF78-106); "As all the colony uses the mixed languages, I also use it, unconsciously" (IM58-84).

On the other hand, those informants who are against language mixture defend themselves with the following opinion: "If it is mixed, it becomes difficult to understand. I speak Japanese for

the Japanese people, and Portuguese for the Brazilian people” (IM89-9). This asserts their linguistic capacity in the two languages and their determination to use them distinctly.

Niseis: Brought up by isseis, generally fluent in Japanese, and living with their sansei children who talk more in Portuguese, many of the niseis have the two languages very present in their quotidian lives. There are many opinions that consider the mixture of the languages normal, natural or habitual, because they are in Brazil or because “there are words that don’t have translation in Japanese” (IM44-30).

Among the informants who accept the mixture are speakers who declare their proficiency in both Portuguese and Japanese: “It’s normal, because you have to understand the two (languages)” (IM61-32). Certain informants do reveal differences in their bilingual proficiency, in the way they speak each of the languages: “When I don’t know how to say (certain words) in Japanese, I mix (the Portuguese). When I talk in Portuguese, I don’t mix . . .” (AF67-25). In case of this informant, the mixture of the languages occurs only when she speaks in Japanese, completing utterances with words in Portuguese; vice versa, when she speaks in Portuguese, the mixing of languages does not happen.

Compared with the other generations, a greater proportion of nisei informants affirm that they speak differently depending on whether their interlocutors are (1) Japanese from Japan, different from the issei immigrants, (2) isseis, (3) niseis or those of the same age, or (4) sanseis or the younger people.

Examples from 1: “For the Japanese from Japan, I don’t mix (the languages), but if the interlocutor is someone who speaks Japanese and Portuguese, I use the *koronia-go*” (IM57-100); “It’s common to mix the words. When I talk to the Japanese (from Japan), I take care about it” (IM30-59).

Examples from 2 and 3: “When I talk to the elders, I intend not to mix, because I think it is disrespectful, but when I talk to those who understand Portuguese, I end up mixing naturally” (AF57-27); “When I talk to the elders, I mix, but with those who are the same age as I am, [I speak] only in Portuguese” (AM33-58)

Example from 4: “I mix a lot when I talk to my son, but I think this is not so good. It would be better if I talked in an easier Japanese.” (AF63-37)

It is noteworthy that, for talking with Japanese from Japan, niseis tried to talk in Japanese; with the old isseis, they spoke Japanese or, depending on their proficiency, mixed the two languages; and with the youngest people, perceiving their difficulty in understanding pure Japanese speech, they mixed Portuguese into their language. The nisei can be very versatile, with their bilingual competence, adapting their speech according to the interlocutor, or can have different grades of proficiency, depending on the language. A person gets to talk with the old isseis, while the other one speaks in Japanese, mixing the Portuguese, supplying the vocabulary missing.

There were answers that asserted it is necessary to mix the languages: “Niseis and sanseis pronounce differently from the isseis. Unless there is mixture, it isn’t possible to talk, nor to understand.” (AM66-11) The necessity is linked first to the limitation of the speaker’s competence, and

then to that of the interlocutor: “As the words miss, I use (mixed). It is necessary because there are words that I can’t translate adequately” (IF24-71); “When we talk to niseis, there are those who don’t understand the words in Japanese, then it doesn’t matter if it is mixed with the Portuguese” (IF56-95).

The number of niseis who declare to mix the two languages was expressive, as seen in the answers of Question 67, but not all of them do that as a voluntary option, as demonstrated in the following opinions: “It’s common to use (the two languages) mixed, but it’s better to separate the Japanese and the Portuguese. In cases of words that have no exact equivalent, there is no way” (AM24-91); “I use it because I communicate myself easily, but I have resistance to mix” (AF44-80); “It’s better to talk without mixing, if possible, but I don’t speak Japanese” (IF55-24).

There are informants who do not value the language that they speak when they mix: “When they speak only in Japanese, I consider it very beautiful” (AF55-73); “It’s not very beautiful, but there is no way” (IF66-56); “I don’t think it’s good (to talk so). I am ashamed when I talk to the Japanese people. For them, it must be difficult to understand, but when we mix the two (languages), it becomes easier for us” (IF58-16). These opinions demonstrate an idealized view of the beauty of the Japanese language and a consciousness of a language norm by which the mixed language the informants themselves use is negatively evaluated. Even so, the informants cannot avoid admitting that this language (*koronia-go*) affords facility in communication, establishing ready understanding among the speakers of the same community.

Sanseis: What is noticed in the answers of the informants of the third generation, many of whom have a better education in Brazil and a high level of proficiency in Portuguese than members of the earlier generations, is that Portuguese is the major language and Japanese the minor: “As I don’t use (Japanese) daily, I end in mixing (Portuguese)” (IM23-23).

The reasons mentioned by the sanseis who approve the mixture of the languages are, first, naturalness, and second, facility and quickness of communication, already mentioned in the discussion of the older generations.

Some sanseis attest to use of Portuguese because of a need to supplement when they lack sufficient competency in Japanese, as in the example mentioned above: “I don’t know Japanese well, and when there are words that I don’t know, I end up mixing the Portuguese” (AF42-50); “When I sometimes talk in Japanese and forget (the word), it ends up in Portuguese” (IF20-13).

There are informants who approve language mixture as a form of training in the Japanese language: “I think it’s good. If I speak mixing, I don’t forget the Japanese, and it’s easy to understand” (AM27-28); “Mixing, I don’t forget the Japanese . . . even the Japanese is a little easy to understand, it would be a training, a practice” (AM35-90). These opinions evidence once more that they feel they have less practice in Japanese than they need to speak freely, and in these cases also express their estimate. Further, there are informants with the following opinions: “It is significant. Even mixing, we can use the Japanese” (AF31-18); “It’s better to have at least a little of the Japanese than to say everything in Portuguese” (IM19-14) “When I talk to my children, more times (than not) I mix, because I want to teach Japanese” (AF32-71), demonstrating clearly a favorable attitude

toward or valorization of the Japanese language.⁷

On the other hand, there are those who showed unfavorable opinions of language mixture: “It is not correct speech, but it is habitual among the Brazilian Nikkeys” (AF27-72). This opinion demonstrates the informant’s consciousness of a linguistic norm that decrees that the mixture of languages is not considered “correct.” Another informant declares that it is “strange and odd, but there is no other way of speaking to the isseis” (IM46-85), and another one answers, “I don’t think it is good, but I don’t have the security (in Japanese), and end up mixing” (AF28-34). In the last two cases, the informants do not approve mixture, but they practice it nevertheless in order to facilitate communication with the isseis, who have greater fluency in Japanese. The opinions, even if not favorable to the practice of language mixture, admit, in these cases, the importance that the “mixed” language has as a means of intergenerational communication, mainly with the isseis.

From the answers obtained in Questions 67 and 68, researchers tried to draw the profile of the three generations, and we noticed that the majority has considered speech with a mixture of the Japanese and Portuguese languages to be natural, normal, and spontaneous, as already mentioned by Doi (2007), although the nature of this “mixture” does not seem so clear in our interviewees’ opinions. In any event, it is known that niseis are the generation with the greatest proportion of mixing the two languages in speech, followed by the sanseis and isseis.

In relation to the opinions about the practice of mixing languages, that is, the use of “colony language,” there is no consensus between the two communities researched. As a rule, the isseis are the most highly disposed to accept the mixture of languages, and they try to speak in a manner that the other generations will understand, mixing Portuguese with their Japanese, which younger people tend to consider difficult. It was also isseis, or a part of that generation, who showed the greatest appreciation of the colony language, the *koronia-go*, projecting on it a linguistic identity. The niseis, with their (in general major) bilingual competence, demonstrate the most complex linguistic behavior among the three generations, with different ways of speaking, depending on the interlocutor. In spite of being the generation that mixes more, this generation includes a subgroup that resists this practice, considering the “colony language” an incorrect form. The sanseis, the newest generation among the three that we researched, try to compensate for deficiencies or forgetfulness of vocabulary in Japanese by using Portuguese, and they mix mainly when speaking with the isseis. In spite of their having the lowest level of command of Japanese among the three generations we examined, some sanseis have a high valuation of the Japanese language, while another subgroup does not approve of language mixture, for many reasons. But there is a consensus among a considerable part of the three generations that the “colony language” is an indispensable medium of communication among the generations in the rural communities researched. The role of this language nowadays in the Nippo-Brazilian community is important, in this sense, in a context very different from that prevailing when it was denominated for the first time, in the 1950s.

My objectives here were to describe the perception of the three Nippo-Brazilian generations about the “colony language,” starting from the opinions of the speakers themselves, with the purpose of elucidating a part of their linguistic habit, and to try to understand those opinions in a determinate social context. We should be careful to note, however, that the above considerations

are restricted to two rural communities of the State of São Paulo. Those communities may not reflect the profile of the entire Nippo-Brazilian population, of which a considerable proportion today resides in urban areas.

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NOTES

- 1 “Shiryōhen: Nichi, Chūnanbei kankei” (Data: Relations between the Japan and Central and South America), *Gaikō fōramu* (International Forum), no. 231 (10/2007), p. 70.
- 2 According to *Nikkei shakai jittai chōsa hōkokusho* (Report of the Social Researches of the Nippo-Brazilian Communities), edited by the Centro de Estudos Nipo-Brasileiros (Nippo-Brazilian Studies Center), in 2002. The number of inhabitants of Aliança is also based on the same report.
- 3 Primeira Aliança was inhabited by the first Japanese immigrants in 1926; Segunda Aliança e Terceira Aliança, in 1927; the Vila Ipelândia received the first Japanese in 1931 (Ota, J. & Morales, L. M. 2003).

4 Further details about the project can be found in the report edited by Osaka University in 2004.

5 There were five alternative answers to the question: 1. Japanese, 2. More Japanese, 3. Half Japanese, half Portuguese, 4. More Portuguese, 5. Portuguese.

6 Independently of the language in which they have answered, the informants' answers were registered in Japanese in "Shiryōhen, gengoseikatsu chōsa, daiichiji dēta" (From Data, First Data of the Census of the Linguistic Habit), in the report about the project (University of Osaka, 2004). All the opinions cited in this article are translated by us.

7 Example also mentioned by Doi (2007), as an expression of the Brazilian Nikkei identity.