

ACCOMPLISHING MULTIETHNIC IDENTITY IN MUNDANE TALK: HALF-JAPANESE TEENAGERS AT AN INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL

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Abstract

This paper examines identity-related interaction in a group of teenagers at an international school in Japan, focusing particularly on the discursive accomplishment of multiethnic identity among so-called half-Japanese (or “*haafu*”) people. The study employs Conversation Analysis (CA) and Membership Categorization Analysis (MCA) to document three instances of mundane talk in which such multiethnic Japanese teenagers are ethnified through the use of various identity categories and their associated activities and attributes. The analysis demonstrates that multiethnic people use a variety of discursive practices to refute unwanted ethnification, including reworking the category, casting themselves in a different category and refusing to react to category-based provocations. Common to all three cases is the fundamental issue of how ethnicity becomes a resource for speakers in everyday conversation.

Keywords: Multiethnic identity; Membership Categorization Analysis; Conversation Analysis; International schools; Ethnicity-in-interaction.

1. Introduction

In Japan, the number of so-called half-Japanese children (or “*haafu*”) has been rapidly increasing over the last twenty years. Lee (1998) suggests that one in thirty-seven babies born in Japan has at least one non-Japanese parent and the annual number of couples entering into international marriage in Japan has increased seven-fold in the last twenty-five years - from 5546 in 1970 to 39,511 in 2004 (JMHLW, 2006). With over 22,000 multiethnic Japanese children being born each year (*ibid.*), issues of identity are receiving unprecedented attention from those families and schools directly concerned.

Children with multiple ethnic backgrounds often face difficulty in attempting to fit into the Japanese education system, which has traditionally dictated assimilation and homogeneity over multiculturalism (Okano & Tsuchiya 1999; Takahashi & Vaipae, 1996). As a result, many dual-heritage families in Japan opt to send their children to international schools, where they can become part of a multilingual community and are free to cultivate and express a multicultural sense of self.

Yet even in educational environments that value diversity, issues of identity are frequently negotiated, disputed and asserted - particularly for multiethnic people, who straddle more than one culture. While most Japanese do not usually use the word *haafu* vindictively, some international families and multiethnic people do not choose to use this term to identify themselves, often because of its implications of inadequacy, deficiency and incompleteness. Some instead having been advocating the use of *daburu*

(“double”), in order to better represent their dual heritage (Singer 2000), although this term has not yet gained widespread usage (Greer 2001) and is rejected outright by many multiethnic Japanese people themselves. However, while such labels are an omnipresent issue for them, they are rarely the subject of open debate on a day-to-day basis. Identity accomplishment is not always overt, and since various aspects of ethnicity can be subtly foregrounded and backgrounded through everyday conversation, it is worth investigating how identities are occasioned, indexed and made relevant during such mundane talk (Antaki & Widdicombe 1998a).

2. Socially accomplishing multi-racial/multiethnic identity: Being ethnified as *haafu*

The study of multiracial and multiethnic identity has a rich tradition in scholarship, including narrative accounts (Arboleda 1998; Gaskins 1999), cultural studies (Luke and Luke 1998), socio-historical research (Murphy-Shigematsu 2001; Nakashima 2001) and ideological forms of discourse analysis (Kamada 2010; Wallace 2004). Of course, in that multiracial people represent a challenge to long held societal myths of ‘race’, other relevant lines of research can be found in the extensive interdisciplinary literature on critical race theory (see Delgado & Stefancic 2001) and whiteness studies, both within the US (see Bush 2011; Garner 2007) and in post-colonial contexts (Green, Sonn and Matsebula 2007).

While most of these scholars would readily recognize mundane talk as one of the prime sites in which racial identity work gets done, it has only been relatively recently that researchers have begun to conduct detailed micro-analysis of the way race becomes a participant’s concern in naturally-occurring interaction. Whitehead and Lerner (2009) document “interactions in which race is invoked seeming ‘incidentally’ in the course of whatever actions speakers are performing” (p. 619). Just as feminist CA researchers have shown how gender categories can go unnoticed and under-contested in day to day interaction (Kitzinger 2005, 2007, 2008; Speer 2005; Stokoe 2008; West & Fenstermaker 2002; Wilkinson & Kitzinger 2003), Whitehead and Lerner demonstrate the asymmetry between white and other racial categories by documenting some recurring interactional environments in which race is mentioned. For example, they empirically argue that interactional practices like making a racial category explicit “just in time” or initiating repair on racial ambiguities can make attitudes toward race visible through the generic details of everyday conversation, which in turn can become a means of reproducing or resisting societal norms. While other scholars of race have noted this line of argument in principle, there is a need for more research that is backed up by detailed empirical evidence rather than anecdotal accounts alone.

To this end, the view of identity that I adopt in this paper is aligned with that laid out by Bucholtz and Hall (2005, 2008) in their work on *sociocultural linguistics* - a panoptic framework that incorporates a variety of like-minded socio-interactional research traditions such as linguistic anthropology, socially based forms of discourse analysis like conversation analysis and critical discourse analysis and linguistically oriented social psychology (2005: 586). The approach that I use primarily in the current study, Membership Categorization Analysis (MCA), will be discussed in further detail in the next section, but for now it sufficient to note that MCA is very much in accord with the sociocultural linguistic view of identity, which Bucholtz and Hall define

broadly as “the social positioning of self and other” (2005: 586). Here, as in other sociocultural linguistic subfields, identity is firmly located in interaction - as a dynamic, emergent display of self rather than a static, internal state: Something we *do*, rather than something we *are*, a self that is relationally constructed through talk rather than inertly situated in our heads. Because interaction exists in the overlap between culture, language and sociality, mundane talk is an appropriate place to search for real-time evidence of how people represent themselves to others, and then to consider how countless instances of identity negotiation at the micro-level coalesce to constitute macro-level ideological structures and processes.

To the extent that it is talked into being, identity is not just about macro-level categories like gender, race or class. Zimmerman (1998) has shown that participant orientations to self and other can also entail turn-by-turn discourse identities like “question initiator” or “selected next speaker” as well as situated identities like “learner” or “vendor” - interactional identities that may be the most relevant thing about a certain speaker in a given conversation. These more ephemeral orientations to self and other can coincide with (and co-comprise) macro-level categories such as those related to gender and race. Zimmerman terms these latter categories “transportable identities”, since they are based on the visible aspects of self that we carry around with us, and can therefore be invoked in interaction (by self or other).

Day (1998) suggests that group categorizations are both orientations to sociality and social actions in themselves (1998: 151). He make use of the notion of *ethnification*, which he defines as “ethnicity as an accomplishment of interlocutors” (p. 151), to focus on the way in which speakers make ethnicity relevant through talk, and the socio-pragmatic resources available to interactants for calling ethnic categories into dispute. The process of discursively constructing an “other” has been widely documented (e.g. Bell 1999; Bucholtz 1999; Iwabuchi 1994; Kamada 2010; Rampton 1999). Common to all these studies is the fundamental issue of how ethnicity becomes a resource for speakers in everyday conversation.

Using Conversation Analysis (CA) along with the participant-centered approach that Sacks (1972b, 1992) called *Membership Categorization Analysis* (MCA) this paper will examine three instances of everyday interaction in which a non-Japanese participant makes a multiethnic person’s ethnic identity relevant to the conversation by using variations of the word “half”. These sequences offer insight into how categories can be mobilized to invoke multiethnic identities in mundane conversation.

3. Membership Categorization Analysis

Sacks developed Membership Categorization Analysis very early in his career (1972a, 1972b, 1992) and his main interest in doing so was to document the way that people choose various categories with which to identify each other - in essence, a set of interactional practices for describing people. Schegloff (2007b) notes that much of this early work was based on written data (e.g. children’s stories, newspaper articles and so on) and that Sacks eventually became more interested in analyzing how such identity categories were treated by other participants in naturally-occurring talk and so concentrated more on Conversation Analysis (CA) in general. Despite the difference in focus, Silverman (1998) believes that CA and MCA can and should be understood as complimentary approaches. Accordingly, the analysis in the current study owes just as

much to CA as it does to MCA. In line with recent CA work on categories, person reference and word selection (Enfield & Stivers 2007; Kitzinger 2005; Stokoe 2008), I view the sequential analysis of interaction as fundamental to explaining formulations of identity in talk.

Perhaps one of the key resources within MCA is what Sacks called the *Membership Categorization Device*, or MCD. An MCD is a collection of categories and the rules for which they are applied (Sacks 1992). Categories such as *mother*, *sister* and *brother* may belong to the *family* MCD, but in another context they may also belong to a *church* MCD. Note also that some of these categories are arranged in *standard relational pairs* (SRPs) such as *driver* and *passenger*, so that the use of one can make the other relevant in subsequent talk. Likewise, there are a variety of activities that are commonly understood to belong to certain categories - "signaling to turn left", for example, would be the sort of activity we would expect from a driver rather than a passenger, and therefore mention of this action in relation to some person may make their situated identity as a *driver* relevant for ongoing talk. Sacks called these identity-linked actions *Category Bound Activities*, or CBAs. Later work on MCA has identified a number of other category-bound predicates, including attributes, epistemics, rights and obligations and entitlements (Jayyusi 1984; Watson 1978).

The important question for MCA is not so much the appropriateness of a given category, but how categories are indexed, occasioned and made relevant and procedurally consequential in conversation. (For fuller discussions of MCA, see Antaki and Widdicombe 1998b; Hester and Eglin 1997a, 1997b; Housley and Fitzgerald 2002; Jayyusi 1984; Psathas 1999; Sacks 1972a, 1972b, 1992; Schegloff 2007b).

Mainstream CA has been criticized for what some researchers see as its limitations, including its apolitical stance (Billig 1999), its over-attention to micro-interactional details and reticence to extend its findings to broader macro-social concerns (Kitzinger 2000) and its reluctance to make analytic judgments beyond the participants' immediate orientations (Bucholtz 2003). However, Housley and Fitzgerald (2002) state that "a concern with category work in interaction can provide a means of explaining interaction and discourse beyond the confines of the macro-micro dualism" (p. 60), and in line with that position the analysis in this paper is focused mainly on the interplay between categories and pragmatic actions.

4. Background to the data

The paper is based on data collected during a combined ethnographic and ethnomethodological investigation into bilingual interaction and identity in a Japanese international school in northern Japan (Greer 2003, 2005, 2007, 2008). The wider study involved researcher observations collected over a period of one and a half years, including video recordings of natural conversations, document analysis, interviews and focus group discussions. The aim was to document ways in which multi-ethnic identity is made relevant in everyday conversation. The present paper focuses on data collected during naturally-occurring conversations in classroom and lunchtime settings.

The key consultants were multi-ethnic Japanese teenagers who were aged between 15 and 18 at the time of the investigation. The majority of these so-called *haafu* had a Japanese mother and an American or British father, and reported that Japanese was their stronger language, though most were also highly proficient in

English and spoke a mix of both languages at home. As the only English-medium high school within the prefecture, the school also had significant numbers of expatriates and sojourners from English-speaking backgrounds as well as English-speaking Japanese returnees who had spent significant periods of their childhoods living abroad. Based on information provided by the teenagers themselves through a simple background survey, Table 1 lists a brief introduction to the teenagers who feature in the current analysis. No attempt was made to quantify their linguistic competence but through interacting with the students over the period of a year and a half, I am confident in saying that each could speak both English and Japanese to some degree and these (and other) languages were regularly heard in daily use on the school campus.¹

Table 1: Participant backgrounds

Pseudonym	Age	Mother's Nationality	Father's nationality	Stronger language	Language(s) spoken at home
Max	17	USA*	USA	English	English
Peter	15	Japanese	UK	Japanese	Japanese and English
Don	16	Taiwan	Taiwan	Mandarin	Mandarin(Japanese,English †English) †
BJ	16	Japanese	USA	English	Japanese and English
Mick	17	Japanese	USA	Japanese	Japanese and English
Yoko	17	Japanese	Japanese	Japanese	Japanese
Nina	17	Japanese	UK	Japanese	Japanese and English
Kate	17	Japanese	USA	Japanese	Japanese

* In terms of 'race', each of the US and UK parents listed in this table was white, while the Japanese and Taiwanese parents were Asian.

† Don lived in the school dormitory, where he frequently used English, Japanese and Mandarin with the other dorm residents. His parents lived in Taiwan and Don reported that he usually spoke with them in Mandarin.

5. Invoking ethnic categories in talk

The referent *haafu* was by no means widely used on a daily basis at the international school, either by the multiethnic participants themselves or by those around them. That is not to say that they were unaware of it or that it was irrelevant to them, but simply that *haafu* was a word that they did not often choose to identify themselves with in mundane talk.

However, *haafu* did not have to be used explicitly for the category "multiethnic Japanese" to be invoked. Activities and attributes that were routinely bound to that category were often used to accomplish the work of ethnification. The use of another category or CBA could make multiethnic identity relevant according to what Sacks termed the consistency rule:

"If some population of persons is being categorized, and if some category from a device's collection has been used to categorize a first Member of the population, then that category or other categories of the same collection may be used to categorize further members of the same population"

¹ For further discussion of the way these teenagers used language choice and bilingual interaction to index their multiethnic identity see Greer 2007, 2008, 2010.

(Sacks 1972: 33; see also Sacks 1992: 225, 238-9, 246).

To examine how this rule is employed in actual talk, the first two sequences will look at cases in which a category-bound activity or attribute is invoked for someone other than the co-present multiethnic participant, which in turn leads to a situation in which ethnic identity is manipulated through the reworking of these categories.

5.1. *You're not white*

In the first excerpt, Max, a 12th grade male, refers to his own ethnicity as a white American, which in turn makes relevant Peter's multiethnic Japanese identity in accordance with the consistency rule. The boys are seated next to each other in the computer lab, surfing the Internet. Peter is looking at a website about basketball, including a photo-gallery of African American basketball players in action.

(1) Half-white

- 01 Peter: hey check this out
02 (0.5)
03 Max: [()]
04 Peter: ((pressed voice)) [suge::]
 'Cool'
05 Max: ((looks at Peter's screen))
06 oh (.) that (.) that's pretty neat.
07 Peter: hhehh hh
08 Max: I can sink that.
09 Peter: yeah?
10 Max: yeah. that's right see I'm gonna be the first
11 → white boy to do a three sixty? (.) flipped up.
12 Peter: like (0.4) put it. (0.5)
13 [((raises his hand, imitating a slam dunk))]
14 [(1.6)]
15 Max: yeah but you're not white.
16 Peter: I'm white. (.) I'm half white
17 Max: → you're half white?
18 Peter: yeah.
19 (1.2)
20 Max: but you're not, (0.4) white.
21 Peter: °yeah I am°
22 Max: I don't think white boys can't jump
23 (2.5)
24 Peter: that's a funny jumping style right
25 (5.0)
26 Peter: ((turns to face Max)) *ne?*
 IP
 'Isn't it?'
28 Max: huh?
29 Peter: [like run up to mid field
 ['n()]
30 [((makes jogging motion with his arms))]

- 31 Max: [((copies the action))]
 32 [(5.0)]
 33 Max: hh
 34 [((Eri enters. Max and Peter look at her.))]
 35 [(1.4)]
 36 Eri: okay
 37 [(0.9)]
 38 [((Max raises his head, smiling))]
 39 Eri: *got it
 40 Max: ((*glances at the camera, smiling))
 41 Eri: what* is the image of (war in the)
 42 Max: ((*returns gaze to his notebook))

The fact that both Max and Peter are members of the school basketball team is highly pertinent to this sequence of interaction, since not only ethnicity but also other MCDs like *basketball team*, *age* and *gender* are all subtly indexed throughout the talk. Prior to this excerpt, there was an extended period of silence in the room, so when Peter initiates a summons in line 1 by saying “hey check this out”, he may be making relevant his and Max’s co-membership on the school basketball team. In most high schools, 10th graders are not free to talk to just any 12th grader. Even given the small number of students in this school, there were many 10th grade boys who would rarely initiate a conversation with Max, perhaps owing to the difference in age. However, for Max and Peter, age does not appear to be an issue that would prevent a freshman from talking to a senior, at least at this point in the conversation. Moreover, by showing Max a series of pictures of people playing basketball, Peter is making public his assumption that Max will find these pictures worthy of interest. By offering an enthusiastic assessment of the photos² in line 4 Peter is inviting a second assessment from Max - specifically one that could be expected to demonstrate agreement.

In line 6, Max provides this agreement in the form of a second assessment, but in a way that is downgraded from *suge::* (cool) to *pretty neat*. Prosodic elements of the talk also help to accomplish the downgrade: Peter delivers *suge::* in a pressed or ‘*rikimi*’ voice (Sadanobu, 2008) which conveys his emotional stance toward the pictures, whereas Max’s turn is delivered in a fairly flat manner along with several hesitant restarts. While Pomerantz (1984) has noted that second assessments can downgrade first assessments, in her data this usually functions to dismiss a compliment, because the person to whom the first assessment refers does the downgraded assessment. In this case however, Peter is implying that the act being performed in the photograph (by a third person) is praise-worthy due to its difficulty, whereas Max’s assessment can be seen as disaligning with Peter’s stance, inferring that it is not such a difficult maneuver. In that sense, by withholding unqualified agreement Max can be heard as “doing expertise”, which might index several MCDs including *age* and *experience*.

Ultimately, this sets the stage for a boast sequence in lines 8-14, in which Max initially asserts that he could complete the dunk being performed in the photo (line 8) and then upgrades the claim by introducing another move (“a three-sixty? (.) flipped up.”) that is hearable as something that is different from what is on the screen.³ Even so,

² Notice also that this assessment is delivered in Japanese, potentially making relevant Peter’s Japaneseness.

³ Although it is not clear from the video just what is happening in the photo on the computer screen, it is most likely not a “three sixty”. The way Max produces lines 10-11, with try-marked

the way that Max delivers his boast in lines 10-11 relies on categorial work related to the *ethnicity* MCD. By asserting that he is going to be “the first white boy” to do something that has so far been the domain of black basketballers, Max accomplishes an elitist stance (Jaworksi & Thurlow 2009) that links the activities bound to one category (black) to a relationally paired category in which he places himself (white). Note that Max uses not just the category *white* but the phrase *white boy*, which is hearable as the kind of referent that might be used in African American English, so in a sense Max is giving voice to the basketballers in the photo. He may also be invoking the proverb-like pop culture reference “White Boys Can’t Jump”,⁴ which he subsequently disputes in line 22. In this way, Max has cast himself in the category *white* in relation to the images on the computer screen in order to further his interactional goal of performing a boast.

Once the *ethnicity* MCD has been invoked, it becomes consequential for the ongoing interaction by occasioning other co-present participants’ ethnic identities in line with the consistency rule. The sort of action that could be expected to occur after a boast like Max’s in line 11 might include appreciation (of the claim) or indeed disagreement (to dispute it), but Peter instead initially responds by further specifying the maneuver that Max mentioned, performing a gesture that depicts it. Peter indexes his co-membership in the *basketball team* MCD by demonstrating knowledge of the move and his ability to perform it, at least via gesture. One way for Max to view this is as a counter-claim. Completing a gesture of a “three sixty flipped up” becomes tantamount to a declaration of basketball proficiency, at least for Max.

In the next turn (line 15) Max produces a disagreement, “yeah but you’re not white”. By doing so at this point, Max displays his understanding that Peter is making a claim to be able to perform the same move, but he is also proposing that the claim is irrelevant. “Yeah but” seems to be a spoken form of “be that as it may”, and therefore works to dismiss what Max sees as Peter’s counter-claim.

Max uses membership categorization as an interactional resource in this endeavour; that is, he casts Peter outside the category *white*, a category in which he has just placed himself (line 11). Since both boys know that Peter is not of African-American heritage, Max’s claim that Peter is not white indexes instead Peter’s Japanese heritage. By making ethnicity and “race” relevant within the conversation, Max attempts to use the category bound attribute *athletic ability* to imply that he could perform the basketball maneuver more proficiently than Peter. Through his talk, Max establishes a three-tiered hierarchy which links sporting prowess to ethnicity and “race”, with “blacks” at the top, “whites” in the middle and “all others” at the bottom. His attempt to cast Peter outside the category of “white”, therefore serves to bolster his claim to be the superior basketball player (see Bilmes 2009, 2011 on semantic hierarchies in interaction).

In line 16, Peter brings Max’s claim into dispute by saying, “I’m white. (.) I’m half white”. He initiates simple direct disagreement to the prior turn, and then qualifies it by reconstituting the category so that he is included. For Peter, the membership category “white” includes the subset “half-white”, but for Max, the two are mutually

intonation, a micro-pause and a post-possible completion with downward intonation, leads me to believe that “a three sixty flipped up” is something other than what is happening in the photo.

⁴ In the 1992 movie “White Boys Can’t Jump” Woody Harrelson plays a (white) former pro-basketball player who hustles black basketballers for money by playing on their assumption that their skills will be better than his. Whether indeed Max is directly referring to that movie here is unclear, but at the very least he seems to have some understanding of the racial stereotype that blacks are better than whites at basketball, since he is calling that stereotype into doubt.

exclusive. Given the link that Max has established between basketball and the categories he has talked into being, Peter's claim to be "half-white" then also implies that he is able to perform the slam dunk move to which Max is referring.

In response to Peter's counter-claim, Max produces a delay device in line 17. The interrogative repeat, "You're half white?" acts as a repair sequence initiator, which ostensibly seeks clarification, but also takes an opposing stance and projects disagreement with Peter's self-categorization, since the trouble source for the repair sequence can be assumed to be Peter's bid to cast himself within the incumbent category *white*. In short, Max's stance works to challenge Peter's claim (see Keisanen 2007). Peter does not provide the self-repair operation and instead in line 18 reasserts his claim to the membership category *half-white*, which he has established in line 16 to be a subset of the membership category *white*.

Max then repeats his earlier ascription in line 20 "but you're not (0.4) white", which sequentially attempts to restore the category to the way Max claims to have originally intended it, meaning "white boy" as "pure white" with himself as the case in point, and casting Peter outside that category. Along with the inter-turn silence in line 19, the 0.4-second pause in line 20, which appears at an incomplete TCU, indicates that this is a guarded reassertion. A turn-internal pause often indicates a word search initiation sequence but here the word "white" has been already used five times in earlier talk. Considering the sequential context, here the silence may instead serve to highlight the word "white", in order to give it the localized meaning "white as I mean white".

In summary, this sequence demonstrates one instance of ethnification in which membership categories are invoked, ascribed and resisted. A white American indexes an ethnoracial category, casting himself as member of that category. When a multiethnic Japanese includes himself within that category the white American challenges this inclusion. As the multiethnic Japanese attempts to reconstitute the category in order to include himself, the white American reinforces the mutual exclusivity of these categories, at least within his understanding of them.

Two things are clear from this sequence. Firstly, social or "transportable" identities (Zimmerman 1998: 90) are accomplished according to the ongoing sequential context of the interaction. Indexing one's own category makes other related categories relevant, and an individual's membership in an incumbent category may be called into dispute. Such a membership category can be used as a resource to accomplish other discursive functions, such as laying claim to athletic superiority during a boast. Of course, this claim in itself has repercussions for a set of gender-related MCD's that are interwoven within the negotiation of ethnicity categories in this sequence, highlighting the simultaneous occasioning of multiple facets of identity.

Secondly, this is mundane talk between peers and ultimately the incident does not cause significant friction between the speakers. This is due in part to the conversational work that both speakers do in diffusing a potentially contentious topic. After Max's reassertion in line 22 that he does not think "white boys can't jump" Peter chooses to avoid further discussion of ethnic categorization instead redirecting the conversation by basing his next turn on the CBA "jump" rather than the disputed category "white boy" to produce a bid for topic change (in line 24). He does this by using *jump* to refer back to the picture on the screen rather than the category that Max has linked it to. Peter refuses to take up the discussion about "race" and seeks alignment on a safer topic. In this way he maintains his own position by not allowing the dispute to go any further.

The sequence ends when Eri interrupts the conversation, but it is perhaps worth noting finally that Max gives the camera a glance and a smile (line 41), which may indicate that he considered the preceding sequence to be a contentious issue that has been “caught on tape”.

Stances played an integral role throughout this sequence of talk (see du Bois 2007). Through the central activity of stance-taking around basketball these social actors are able to discursively accomplish the semiotic meanings of “white” and “multi-ethnic”. It is through the object and its cultural and global connotations that the participants are able to align and disalign with societal discourses on the object, and their own accretion of stances throughout this and other conversations (Damari 2010; Rauniomaa 2003). They draw on broader discourses of masculine expertise in order to construct localized understandings for their own youth culture and style (e.g., Bucholtz 2011).

5.2. *You’re half*

We have seen how Max and Peter were able to talk the category “white” into being and negotiated the meaning of “half-white”, and how issues of masculinity played a role in this process. As noted earlier, “half” and its Japanese phonological equivalent “*haafu*” are the most commonly used referents for multiethnic people in Japan. While in the previous sequence the white American, Max, rejected “half-white” as equivalent to “white”, in an earlier conversation he saw *haafu* as a positive descriptor and used it instead to align with the person to whom he was referring.

Roughly seven minutes before the sequence examined in excerpt (1), Max was taking part in a study hall session in a different classroom seated at a cluster of desks with BJ (an 11th grade American-Japanese male) and Don (an 11th grade Taiwanese male). Although they were ostensibly studying math and the general atmosphere of the room was quiet, Max had been intermingling various ribald jokes into the discussion for Don’s amusement. Prior to this sequence, BJ had been listening to music on his headphones, so he was not active in the previous talk. At the point where the sequence begins, Max has been talking about the radius of a circle, which is part of the geometry problem he and Don are working on, but the gestures that he has been using to accompany his talk have broadened the meaning of “circle” so that at this stage in the talk Don understands Max to be clandestinely referring to a penis, and is having difficulty containing his laughter.

(2) Circles

- 01 Max: ((to BJ)) [he’s (.) I dunno what to do with him]
 02 Don: [.hhh HEH HA ehuh heh]
 03 Max: °(he’s gone [ma:d])°
 04 Don: [ehHEheh]
 05 awright it’s a [circle]
 06 Max: [i:t’s] a *small circle
 07 Don: hheh heh ha *((gestures ‘small’))
 08 Max: right?
 09 [((camera is being repositioned))
 10 Max:→ [like a Japanese man’s is [right]]

- 11 [((clonk))]
 12 Don: ye(h)ah ri(hh):ght he [He]
 13 BJ?: [hha]
 14 (0.7) ((Max turns to BJ))
 15 Max: [No offence]=
 16 [((pats hand towards BJ))]
 17 =but yeah=
 18 BJ:→ =[yeah I'm a foreigner
 19 [((gestures a length to Max using thumb and
 20 forefinger about 10 cm apart))
 21 (0.6)
 22 Max:→ you're half [(so it doesn't include you)]
 23 Don: [this is tape recorded]
 24 (0.3)
 25 Max: so
 26 ((clonk))
 27 Max: [((forms another circle with both hands))]
 28 [(0.5)]

In his ongoing effort to make Don laugh, Max indexes the category *Japanese*. As Don attempts to redirect the conversation back to the geometry problem they are supposed to be discussing (in line 5), Max qualifies Don's utterance in overlap to "it's a small circle" (line 6), which allows him to reprise his comic stance by using a post-possible completion increment to extend his utterance (in line 10) to "like a Japanese man's is". In doing so, Max continues to cast the object (a circle) not as an element of their legitimate study but instead, through innuendo, insinuate that the circle represents a male sexual organ. Don acknowledges the sexually-oriented stance in line 12 with a laughed appreciation response, but this also causes a dilemma sequentially for Max because he has invoked a membership category (and its category bound attribute) that potentially makes relevant BJ's membership in the category that he has been disparaging. If the circle is small "like a Japanese man's is" (line 10) and BJ is Japanese, then Max's joke could logically being interpreted as implying that BJ also possesses a small "circle".

Max demonstrates his recognition of the category work that his comment has occasioned and initiates a bid for affiliation in line 15 by patting his hand in the air in BJ's direction while formulating an apology. He then follows this immediately in line 17 with a reassertion of his category ascription by saying "but yeah", which reestablishes the CBA as one which Max still considers appropriate, but may also project a possible change of topic.

In line 18 BJ resists Max's ethnification by laying claim to membership in an alternative category within the *ethnicity* MCD ("Yeah, I'm a foreigner"), accompanying his utterance with a gesture that makes relevant the attribute associated with that identity category. Note that this gesture is only fully comprehensible in relation to the previous talk, particularly in comparison to Max's gesture in line 7. It works because it lays claim to being the opposite of a "small circle", which in this local sequential context has become bound to the category *Japanese*. In this way, BJ uses the embodied action of a gesture in conjunction with an overt claim to membership in a category that is the second part of standard relational pair (Japanese/foreigner).

Max further works to reconstitute the category in line 22 by casting BJ as *half*, and explicitly locating him outside the membership category *Japanese* ("it doesn't

include you”). Both speakers here can be seen to rework ethnic membership categories in order to maintain harmony and save personal face. As in the previous sequence, the multiethnic Japanese teenager is successfully able to contest ethnic categories in order to diffuse a potentially volatile situation.

Likewise, elements of the participants’ gendered identities also come into play in this sequence, as they work to recast the incumbent categories in a bid for affiliation. The talk in this segment is prompted by a non-linguistic but nonetheless consequential semiotic mediation. Through embodied interaction, the diagram of the circle on Max’s page comes to operate as a multi-purpose index on which the actors make meaning. However, it is a masculine sense of ethnicity that the social actors are drawing on in this sequence, which also restricts who can participate in this talk as evaluators, or stance-takers. Thus, gender in this example is central to the way the participants accomplish mixed ethnicity and ethnoracialized discourses about the body.

Kamada (2008, 2009, 2010) has used feminist post-structuralist discourse analysis (FPDA) to look at how ideologies of gender impact on multi-ethnic Japanese teenagers and are reflected in what they say about their own bodies. The teenagers in her study reported that Japanese people ethnified them in terms of their foreign (*gaijin*) attractiveness, including prominent facial features, height and beauty. While Kamada’s approach relies on interview data and analyst interpretations, the current study offers support to her findings through an emic analysis of real-time, naturally occurring talk. When multi-ethnic Japanese people are attributed with non-Japanese physical features, it is often meant as praise or a compliment. It may also accomplish distinction or, as in the present case where the speaker is non-Japanese, adequacy (see Bucholtz and Hall 2005) and therefore function as a form of discursive inclusion. At the same time, multi-ethnic people have the ability to align or disalign with such category work based on the way they respond, allowing for some troubling of the language-interaction-gender nexus.

5.3. *Non-reaction as reaction*

Although both the previous excerpts centered around the use of the word half/*haafu*, such explicit references to *haafu* were rare in the data I collected. For the most part, the participants did not often call each other *haafu* or *foreigner* or *Japanese* to any great extent in mundane talk. Based on what they reported during the focus group sessions I conducted (Greer 2005), it seems that these categories are more likely to come to the fore in first contact situations, such as when multiethnic Japanese people meet someone new. The data that I collected were conversations between people who had known each other for some time, so there was little opportunity to capture the kind of category work that goes on when a stranger tries to come to terms with the notion of a half-Japanese person.

Even so, as can be seen from the two excerpts so far, a category need not be referred to explicitly in order for identity work to be accomplished. Some feature associated with that category is often enough to cast the recipient as multiethnic. Consider the following conversation, taken from around the lunch table, in which the participants have been discussing TOEFL, an English language test that Yoko (a 12th grade Japanese female) had recently taken in order to apply to an American university.

(3) People like you

01 Max: I think the system’s so screwed up

- 02 → people like you don't have to take it
 03 and she does that's just so screwed up
 04 ((points to Mick on 'you' and to Yoko
 05 while producing 'she does'))
 06 Mick: °mm:°
 08 (4.0)
 09 Max: how does how does that work?
 10 Nina: ((a quick glance at the camera
 11 then continues eating))
 12 (9.0)
 13 Mick: ((gives a loud sigh))
 14 Mick: °(ben san)° ((Mick and Nina look at
 15 Nina: [°(ben san)°] someone passing by))
 16 ?? [()] ((peripheral talk))
 17 Yoko: (*demo kirai ja nai*) ((to Kate))
 but hate COP NEG
 ('But I don't mind it.')
- 18 Kate: (*fusafusa no chairo ni natteru.*) ((to Yoko))
 fluffy NOM brown to become-CONT
 ('It's gone all fluffy and brown.')
- 19 (2.0)
 20 Max: wasn't TOEFL really easy?
 21 Yoko: mm *demo ne* (.) first you do like li:stening?
 but IP
 22 'n it's really easy. It's like,

After Max makes public his negative stance toward “the system”, the membership categorization work in this excerpt begins in line 2 as part of an account in which Max directs the referent “people like you” toward Mick, a multiethnic Japanese person, specifically in comparison to Yoko who is cast as a member of the category *Japanese*. Note that Max combines gaze direction with categorial work to make it clear that second-person referent ‘you’ indexes Mick (see Lerner 1996). By formulating this categorization as “people like you” rather than just “you”, Mick becomes representative of a group and Yoko is therefore likewise heard as representative of another group. Max is implying that he believes Mick does not have to sit for the TOEFL examination because he has dual (US/Japan) citizenship, whereas Yoko, who only has a Japanese passport, is required to take the test.⁵

Having to take a test of language proficiency is an activity that is logically bound to the membership category *non-native* (or *novice*) *speaker*, and since Mick does not have to take the test he is placed outside that membership category. That is to say, by virtue of the SRP that is put into operation, Max categorizes Mick as a native speaker of English (at least for the purposes of college entrance tests). However, by assessing this negatively, Max is disputing the appropriateness of this category. Specifically, he is calling into question Mick's language proficiency in relation to Yoko's and implying that her English is equal or better than Mick's, despite the fact that she is required to take the test.

Because Max implies the college entrance requirements are based on nationality rather than language proficiency, the two categories become conflated. The insinuation

⁵ Note, in fact some US colleges do not require all non-US citizens to take the TOEFL test, but this is not the understanding that Max demonstrates in the data.

is that Mick is somehow taking advantage of his dual nationality to make the college application process easier and by extension that this is an act of deception.

So when Max refers to Mick as “people like you” he is employing a euphemism that is linked to the category *multiethnic*. In its broadest possible hearing, he might be referring to all people who have dual citizenship with an English-speaking country, but given Max’s negative assessment he seems to be using the referent more specifically in relation to multiethnic people who do not have native-like command of English, which would arguably include Mick. Whichever way Max meant it, he has invoked the category in its plural form “people like you”, which potentially makes the same identity categories relevant for other multiethnic people sitting around the table, including Nina and Kate.

Given that Mick’s categorization implies some kind of challenge or accusation, it is worth considering how those who have been cast in the category deal with this action. Mick reacts initially with a minimal response token (line 6) that is audibly softer than the surrounding talk, but which acknowledges some sort of recognition that Max’s turn was directed primarily at him. This is followed by four seconds of silence at a slot in which Mick might be expected to defend himself, the sort of response that becomes sequentially relevant after an accusation. Having received only minimal uptake from Mick, Max then self-selects to produce a second attempt at initiating an action-sequence (line 9), this time with a direct question - an interactional form that is more difficult for Mick to ignore since it is the first part of an adjacency pair (Schegloff 2007a). Yet Mick’s response is again no response, at least for a full nine seconds, before he lets out an audible sigh and then changes the topic by doing a noticing of something external to the current conversation. That is to say Mick refuses to enter any discussion on this topic, choosing instead to let it pass.

Nina also appears to be sensitive to the category work that is occurring in this sequence, firstly in line 10 by attending to the camera at the point where Mick’s response is procedurally relevant, and then in lines 14-15 by co-participating in the noticing that Mick uses to ignore the topic that Max has raised. The other participants are likewise actively engaged in avoiding the conversation. Kate and Yoko carry out peripheral talk in Japanese on a different topic (lines 17-18) that initiates a schisming (Egbert 1997) to partition the conversation and effectively eliminate themselves from Max’s line of questioning.

During the gaps of silence in lines 8-12 Ryan and Nina both choose to put food in their mouths rather than comment on what Max is saying. This might be coincidental, but owing to the length of this pause either of them would have been able to self-select to enter into the conversation if they so desired. By engaging in the business of eating they are conveniently able to avoid the conversation in a way that is less noticeable than the response that Mick is performing. However, in the end it is Mick that is being made accountable in this instance so it is more difficult for him not to respond.

Faced with this refusal to provide uptake, Max redirects the conversation to Yoko in line 20. While this still potentially leaves Max the option of continuing his line of argument at some later opportunity, for the moment Mick is no longer the focus of the conversation and Yoko goes on to change the topic by joking about the simplistic nature of the TOEFL test. Just as Peter did in excerpt (1), Mick refuses to take part in talk in which his incumbent membership in the category *multiethnic* could be considered problematic.

This excerpt also sheds light on how multiethnicity is invoked and accomplished in regards to institutions. The interactants draw on institutional conceptualizations of linguistic competency to mediate the group's hierarchical understandings of multiethnicity in social organization. The participants draw on and enact stances with respect to asymmetrical institutional access, critiquing them as well as using them as a resource for restructuring local social organization and identity categories. The talk in this excerpt is doubly reflexive in that it is also a metalinguistic and metapragmatic discussion that topicalizes language, social organization and identity in ways that are often left implicit.

6. Conclusion

This paper has offered some initial observations on a number of ways multiethnic Japanese people accomplish aspects of their identity in interaction. It was found that the identity category *multiethnic* could be constituted not only through direct use of referents like *haafu* or *foreigner*, but also by using other categories that belong to the *ethnicity* MCD, or by indexing certain traits and activities that are routinely attributed to either the *Japanese* or *non-Japanese* categories. Such category-bound activities contained elements of both hyper-competence and hypo-competence, including cultural knowledge, social competencies and linguistic proficiency in both Japanese and English. These categories are talked into being and can be used as an interactional resource in the ongoing conversation. The process of identity accomplishment in interaction was made available only through careful observation, systematic transcription and comprehensive microanalysis of the way that membership categories are employed in mundane talk.

All co-participants had a part to play in constituting membership categories, and could be used in the business of carrying out some other social action. A white American might deny a multiethnic person access to the category *white* in order to brag about his own athletic skills, or call someone else *haafu* in order to differentiate him from the category *Japanese* when it has been negatively assessed in prior talk. Multiethnic people likewise participate in co-accomplishing these identities, either by accepting or refuting the identity categories, or by reconstituting them in ways that are more inclusive. As we saw in excerpt (3), multiethnic people can sometimes also refuse to provide uptake on talk that involves category-bound activities, enabling them to work against the occasioning of a negative categorization. Invoking the word *haafu* indexes other ethnic and racial categories like “white”, “Japanese” and “native-speaker”, and since multi-ethnic Japanese people straddle and traverse such boundaries, the categories people use shed light on how they view and reproduce racial normativity on a day-to-day, turn-by-turn basis. When speakers use assessments to display their stances about ethnoracial normativity it serves to legitimize distinctions between categorical identities and thus perpetuate the social institutions they sustain (see West & Fenstermaker 2001: 541 for related discussion on gender).

A willingness to examine the way that identity categories like *haafu* are used in conversation may help international families, teachers and multiethnic people themselves to understand whether ethnicity categories are being used negatively or positively in everyday conversation, and how such referents can be relevant even when they are not explicitly spoken at all. Such an understanding may encourage them to take each one at a time, in the way that the teenagers at this international school in Japan did.

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