



“English Is Just Like an Outer Shell”: A Case Study of a Multilingual Indian Family in Tokyo

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Abstract: This case study examines the reported language practices of a 13-year-old boy and his father from Kerala, India, living in Tokyo, as well as the meanings associated with Malayalam, English and Japanese. Methodologically, the data were generated through a language portrait produced by the child and separate semi-structured interviews with the child and his father. The study analyses how these languages are used, positioned, and given meaning in everyday life.

The analysis shows that Malayalam, his first language, is represented as the most emotionally grounded language, although its use is limited to within the family and the Malayali community. It is closely associated with family, Malayali identity, and belonging. His father’s account similarly connects Malayalam with roots. English is used frequently at school and in other social settings. However, it is positioned as a more external language, described as “like an outer shell”. Japanese is positioned mainly as a language of local participation and mediation.

The findings suggest that meanings associated with languages cannot be understood simply through their frequency or range of use. This case also highlights the complementary value of interpreting a language portrait together with oral explanation and interview data.

1. INTRODUCTION

The number of foreign residents in Japan has increased steadily in recent years. According to data from the Immigration Services Agency of Japan (2025), approximately 3.77 million foreign nationals were registered as residents in Japan. This demographic change has increased the linguistic and cultural diversity of Japanese society, raising important issues for educational policies and practices.

Sociolinguistics research on migrant communities has a relatively short history. Early studies primarily focused on more established migrant populations, including Chinese and Korean “oldcomer” communities (Otomo, 2019, pp. 91-93). Research on these long-established communities has addressed heritage-language maintenance, bilingual educational opportunities, and school-based language planning (Otomo, 2019, pp. 92-92). Much subsequent research has focused on migrants for whom acquiring Japanese is

considered essential to settlement and participation in Japanese society, particularly within Japanese-medium education. Fukunaga (2014, p. 33) further notes a tendency to discuss migrants' linguistic difficulties in terms of a binary opposition between Japanese and their first or family language. Taken together, much research has often focused on the relationship between Japanese and a single family language. Less attention has been paid to more recent migrant families, including many families in Tokyo, in which the family language differs from both Japanese, the principal language of the surrounding society, and English, which is used as a language of education. Previous studies described Indian families in Tokyo in which Indian languages are used within families and English is used as a language of schooling. (Sawa & Minamino, 2009; Inoue, 2021; Wadhwa, 2021) The linguistic experiences of these families are therefore difficult to capture within the frameworks that have shaped much of the previous research.

Some Indian families living in the Greater Tokyo area provide one example of this configuration. Previous studies have described that some families who have settled in Japan on a long-term basis maintain an Indian language at home while choosing English-medium education for their children (Inoue, 2021; Sawa, 2025; Wadhwa, 2021). In these families, the parents' language, English, and Japanese may fulfil different roles across the home, school, peer relationships, and the local community. These families provide a relevant context for examining how languages are used within individual families and what meanings individuals associate with them.

This article presents a qualitative case study of a 13-year-old boy and one of his parents from a Kerala-origin family living in Tokyo. The family is examined not as representative of families from Kerala, India, as a whole, but as one case of a family whose linguistic repertoire includes Malayalam, English and Japanese. Following Spolsky (2008), language practices are understood here as regular patterns of language use and language choice. To explore meanings that may not be captured through accounts of language use alone, the study also uses a language portrait, a

visual-discursive method that invites participants to present their linguistic repertoires through colour and imagery and to reflect on and explain their choices (Krumm, 2001; Busch, 2018). Drawing on the language portrait and separate semi-structured interview with the child and his father, the study examines the family's language practices involving Malayalam, English and Japanese and the meanings the participants associate with these languages.

2. BACKGROUND

To situate the case examined in this study, this section first outlines multilingualism and the roles of English in India, before describing the broader linguistic environment of Indian families living in Tokyo.

2.1. Multilingualism and English in India

India is a highly multilingual country characterised by considerable linguistic diversity. At the Union level, Hindi and English serve official functions, while 22 languages are recognised under the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution (Department of Official Language, Ministry of Home Affairs). In addition to these scheduled languages, the 2011 Census recorded a large number of non-scheduled languages of at least 10,000 speakers (Office of the Register General & Census Commissioner, India, 2011; The Indian Express, 2018). Malayalam, one of the languages examined in this case study, is a Dravidian language spoken primarily in the southern Indian state of Kerala. This multilingualism is also reflected in the Indian education system. The medium of instruction varies across states and educational institutions, with regional languages, Hindi, and English used in different combinations. English, in particular, plays an important role as a medium of instruction in higher education and is closely associated with access to universities and professional employment both within and outside India. The number of English-medium schools has also increased in India, and the importance of English has continued to grow alongside the expansion of educational opportunities (Graddol, 2010).

Kerala provides a relevant educational migration

context for the present study. Large-scale international migration from Kerala began in the 1970s and has since had a significant impact on the state's economy and society (Zachariah et al., 2001). These linguistic, educational, and migration-related conditions provide a relevant background for the present case, in which three languages are used in different settings.

2.2. The Linguistic Environment of Indian Families in Tokyo

Since the 1990s, the number of Indian IT specialists migrating to Japan has increased. Many of these early migrants were men who came to Japan alone. As their periods of residence became longer, however, some were joined by their families, leading to an increase in households consisting of IT professionals, their spouses, and children (Sawa & Minamino, 2009).

Within Tokyo, Indian residents have become particularly concentrated in Edogawa Ward. The number of Indian residents in the ward increased from approximately 3,800 in 2018 to approximately 7,700 by April 2025 (Edogawa City, 2020, 2025a). The Nishi-Kasai area, in particular, is widely known as a centre of the Indian community and has sometimes been described as Tokyo's "Little India" (Wadhwa, 2021).

As the Indian population grew in and around the area of Nishi-Kasai, a range of community institutions and services has developed, including Indian grocery shops, restaurants, religious institutions, cultural organisations, and schools. This community infrastructure enables residents to remain many of their food practices, cultural activities, and connections with Indian social life while living in Japan (Sawa & Minamino, 2009; Inoue, 2021, pp. 6-9; Sawa, 2025).

Inoue (2021, p.10) observes that some newcomer Indian residents regard basic communicative competence in Japanese as sufficient for everyday life. Some may therefore consider it more worthwhile to devote time and effort to passing their own culture on to their children and preparing them for higher education in English-speaking countries than acquiring advanced proficiency in Japanese.

The social and linguistic environment is also closely related to families' choices concerning their children's schooling. Since the establishment of the India International School in Japan in 2004, the availability of English-medium education through Indian international schools has expanded in Tokyo and the surrounding area. By 2020, nine Indian international schools were operating in Tokyo and the surrounding area (Inoue, 2021). Inoue (2021, pp. 8-10) notes that many Indian families remain potentially mobile and may return to India or relocate to a third country. For these families, English-medium schooling can provide continuity of education and facilitate future access to higher education conducted in English. Indian international schools in the Tokyo area offer Indian and International curricula that can support educational continuity when children relocate.

The choice of an international school may also be related to considerations other than international mobility and access to higher education. Based on interviews with Indian parents in Tokyo, Wadhwa (2021) describes concerns relating to differences between Japanese and Indian educational practices, parents' limited proficiency in Japanese and their ability to participate in their children's schooling, and the possibility that children might develop a predominantly Japanese rather than Indian identity (pp. 72-76, 79-80). Indian international schools may therefore be valued not only for their practical educational advantages and the educational continuity they offer in the context of future mobility, but also as environments in which parents feel that their children's Indian identity can be supported.

This does not mean that Japanese is regarded as entirely unimportant among Indian families in Tokyo. Some families considering long-term residence or settlement in Japan may wish their children to learn Japanese and participate more in the surrounding society while also maintaining an Indian family language and receiving education through English (Wadhwa, 2021).

Taken together, the preceding discussion suggests that some Indian families in Tokyo who live in multilingual social and educational environments that show, in some respects,

continuity with multilingual language use and educational experiences in India. The studies reviewed broader educational, community, and mobility-related context for these environments. Building on this contextual work, the present case study turns into the level of an individual family. It therefore examines how Malayalam, English and Japanese are used within the family with roots in Kerala, India, living in Tokyo, and what meanings the child and his father associate with these languages.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Design

This article draws on data from a broader qualitative study involving three Indian families living in Tokyo. The family examined here was selected for the analysis because its linguistic background provides a particularly relevant case for examining a regional Indian language, English and Japanese, and the child's language portrait and the separate interview with the child provided detailed material for examining both reported language use and the meanings associated with these languages. This study adopts a qualitative case study to examine the language practices of a family with roots in Kerala, India, living in Tokyo and the meanings that the participants associate with their languages. It draws on a child's language portrait, his oral explanation of the portrait, and separate semi-structured interviews with the child and one parent.

3.2. Participants

The participants were Jacob (a pseudonym), a 13-year-old boy, and his father. They are both from Kerala, India. Jacob had lived in Tokyo for 13 years, while his father had lived in Japan for approximately 20 years and worked as an IT engineer. The household consisted of Jacob, his parents and his younger brother. Malayalam was used within the family.

Jacob attended an English-medium Indian International school up to Grade 3 and then transferred to a local public elementary school, which he attended from Grade 4 to Grade 6. At the time of the study, he attended a private junior high

school offering a bilingual Japanese-English International Baccalaureate curriculum. English and Japanese were used as languages of instruction, depending on the subject.

3.3. Data Collection

Data were collected during a single research session held in March, 2025 in a university research room. Jacob and his father sat in separate areas of the same room. While Jacob created a language portrait, his father took part in a semi-structured interview. Jacob was interviewed before and after creating the language portrait. The session was conducted in English. All interviews and Jacob's oral explanation of the portrait were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Language portraits have been used to explore multilingual children's linguistic repertoires and the experiences, thoughts, and feelings associated with them (Krumm, 2001). They can also provide participants with an opportunity to pause and reflect on linguistic practices and preferences that may otherwise pass without awareness, and then talk about them (Busch, 2018, p. 6). Busch (2018) describes the method as representing linguistic repertoires through both pictorial-presentational and linguistic-discursive modes, allowing participants to move between visual and verbal forms of expression. Accordingly, Jacob's portrait and oral explanation were analysed together.

In the present study, the language portrait procedure was adapted by asking Jacob to construct the entire portrait from scratch rather than providing a pre-drawn body silhouette. This adaptation left the form of self-representation open and allowed him to decide how to depict himself. He was provided with a sketchbook, twelve coloured pencils, and one graphite pencil. He was asked to assign colours to his languages and to use them freely to represent how those languages formed part of him. The instructions emphasised that the drawing did not need to resemble a conventional portrait and that there was no correct or incorrect way to complete the activity. After completing the portrait, he was asked to explain his choices orally, mainly in response to questions from the researcher.

The semi-structured interviews explored the participants' language use across family, school, peer, and community contexts, as well as their experiences and views of using multiple languages. His father's interview also addressed the child's linguistic and educational history and school choices.

This study was conducted as part of a master's thesis and received approval from the university. The purpose of the research, the voluntary nature of participation, and the intended use of the data were explained in advance. Written consent was obtained from the parent, and the research was explained to the child using age-appropriate language.

Pseudonyms are used throughout the article, and identifying details have been omitted or modified to protect the family's confidentiality.

3.4. Data Analysis

Jacob's language portrait and oral explanation, his semi-structured interviews, and his father's semi-structured interview were analysed qualitatively. The analysis examined the participants' descriptions of how language use and language choice varied across domains and interlocutors. It also considered how the participants positioned and valued their languages and the meanings and values they associated with them.

The transcripts were read closely, and passages containing units of meaning were extracted and labelled with reference to the open-coding procedure described by Sato et al. (2019). The labelled passages were then compared and organised according to recurring content relating to language use and choice, self-evaluations of language proficiency, feelings and attitudes towards languages, and accounts of identity. Attention was also paid to recurrent expressions in the interviews and oral explanation, as well as to the ways in which the languages were represented visually in the portrait. Following Busch (2018), Jacob's portrait and accompanying account were interpreted together.

4. FINDINGS

This section presents the findings from Jacob's

language portrait and the semi-structured interviews with Jacob and his father. It first outlines Jacob's language practices involving Malayalam, English, and Japanese in different settings. The following subsections examine the meanings associated with these languages.



Figure 1- Jacob's Language Portrait

Figure 1 presents Jacob's language portrait. He selected brown for Malayalam, blue for English and green for Japanese. The meanings he assigned to these colours and their placement are examined in Sections 4.2–4.4.

4.1. Language Practices in Everyday Life

Jacob reported using different languages according to the settings and the linguistic repertoire of his interlocutor in his everyday life.

First, at home, Jacob reported using mainly Malayalam and occasionally English. Jacob stated that Japanese was not used at home. Jacob explained that he mixed Malayalam and English when he did not know the word that he needed in one of the languages:

(1)

Jacob: “I don't mix. Specifically, I don't mix Malayalam and Japanese a lot, but there are times when I mix English and Malayalam, for example at home, sometimes.”

Interviewer : “In what kind of situation?”

Jacob: “There are some words that I still don't know in Malayalam, so I just say those words in English”.

The relative areas occupied by three colours in Jacob's language portrait prompted a question about frequency of use. Jacob explained that he had not intended the amount of each coloured area to represent how often he spoke the language. As he reflected further, he suggested that Malayalam might be the language he used the least.

(2)

Jacob: “Not a lot. Only a few of my friends actually speak Malayalam. Most of them speak English. Well, now that I think about it, it might be true that I speak Malayalam the least because most of the people I know speak English and Japanese. Probably only a few of them actually know Malayalam.”

In Japan, Jacob used Malayalam primarily with his parents and younger brother, in the Malayali community¹, and with his grandparents through video calls. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the family visited Kerala almost every year. During these visits, he used Malayalam with relatives and neighbourhood friends:

(3)

Interviewer: “You speak with your parents, with your little brother, and some of your friends?”

Jacob: “Yeah, especially my friends in India.”

Interviewer: “Like through video calls?”

Jacob: “Well, I only video-call my grandparents, but whenever I visit India, like with our neighbours, we talk in Malayalam.”

At school, Jacob used English or Japanese depending on the language understood by the person with whom he was speaking:

(4)

Jacob: “In my class, everyone knows English, so we speak in English, but in the other classes they only understand Japanese, so we speak in Japanese.”

Jacob had attended an Indian international school before transferring to a Japanese public elementary school in Grade 4. He subsequently entered a secondary school offering bilingual education in English and Japanese, where the language of instruction varied by subject. Outside the classroom, he also used English with youth members at church and as a common language with Indian friends from regions where Malayalam was not spoken. He used Japanese with Japanese-speaking students and in some interactions within the local community.

4.2. Malayalam as “the Colour of My Skin”

As shown in Figure 1, Jacob represented Malayalam in brown in his language portrait and placed the colour on parts of the face, hands, and legs. He explained that the reason he selected brown for Malayalam was that it represented his skin colour and because Malayalam was associated with Kerala, where he was from:

(5)

Jacob: “It's mainly because of my skin colour. And Malayalam—it's Kerala, where I'm from. So, it's my mother tongue. And I feel like I kind of represent that

¹ 1 Nationalist is a community association for people from Kerala living in Japan. Established in 1986 and registered as an *ippan shadan hojin* (general incorporated association), it operates in Tokyo, Nagoya, Osaka, Fukuoka, Touching, and Gunma. The organization holds social and cultural events, provides mutual support to the

Kerala community, participates in social causes in Japan and India, and promotes cultural exchange and relations between India and Japan. <https://www.nihonkairali.com/>(as of 25 July 25, 2026)

language and culture” .

Jacob thus linked Malayalam to his physical appearance, place of origin, and cultural background. When asked which language made him feel most like himself, he also identified Malayalam:

(6)

Jacob: “It’s Malayalam because it’s the first language that I learned when I was a kid, and I talk in it with my family, so it feels comfortable” .

Jacob also connected Malayalam with family relationships and a sense of comfort. He further expressed that many people from Kerala were moving abroad and referred to the possibility that their children might lose their connection with their homeland and culture. He therefore felt that he should preserve Malayalam and its associated culture.

(7)

Jacob:” Malayalam, it’s my culture. It’s where I’m from, so I feel like I should keep that culture, right, because in recent years, in Kerala everyone is moving outside, so like for example, when they move to America their kids are also going to be born in America and they’re not gonna have a connection with their homeland and culture so I feel like I should protect it right?”

Jacob’s father similarly regarded Malayalam as more than a means of communication, describing it as a language connected to roots and identity.

(8)

Jacob’s father: “My wife and I both wanted to have our children the roots, the identity, I think the language is not just not just this medium of communication, but it has an identity as well, so we thought like, in the core, in the center of it all, Jacob is from Kerala, Jacob is Malayali. So, we want to give him that identity inside of him. So, he consciously chose to speak in our mother tongue at home.”

Jacob’s father also distinguished proficiency in English and Japanese from Jacob’s identity as someone from Kerala:

(9)

Jacob’s father: “I am never a Japanese person. I don’t think anybody see me as Japanese or treat me as Japanese, even if I speak really good Japanese. I work with the Japanese. I will never be a Japanese person. I don’t have an identity like in Japan as a Japanese, and I’m not American either so I mean I can speak English but my thinking, my point of view is not American in most cases, so I don’t but I am Malayalam. I am from Kerala, so that is my identity. So even Jacob has good Japanese. He speaks excellent Japanese and English. But even then, he won’t be a Japanese person, so he won’t be an American. He’s an Indian, he’s from Kerala. I think that this is his identity. I don’t know if he realizes it now, but there will be a time when he realizes that, I want to equip him for developing the language.”

His father explained that the family used Malayalam at home because he wished Jacob to develop an identity as someone from Kerala. He also emphasised that speaking Malayalam enabled Jacob to communicate directly with his grandparents in India without an interpreter.

In both Jacob’s and his father’s accounts, Malayalam was therefore positioned as a language connecting Jacob to his family and cultural roots.

4.3. English as an “Outer Shell”

In his language portrait, Jacob surrounded his body with blue, the colour he had selected for English. He explained that he generally spoke English with people who were not Japanese, but that internally he was Malayali:

(10)

Jacob: “Inside, really, I am Malayali. I’m from Kerala, so inside that’s my real colour. English is just like an outer shell kind of thing” .

Jacob described what he associated with Malayalam as his “real colour”, while referring to English as “an outer shell”. However, English is not a peripheral language in his everyday life. As described in Section 4.1, he used Malayalam less frequently and across a more limited range of settings, whereas he used English frequently across a wide range of settings, including school, church, and interactions with friends from different linguistic backgrounds.

4.4. Japanese as a Language of Local Participation and Mediation

Jacob represented Japanese in green and placed the colour on the clothing of the figure in his language portrait. He explained that he represented Japanese through clothing because it was the language he used when speaking to most people in Japan. to remain in Japan for the longer term. Jacob was therefore transferred from an Indian International school to a Japanese public elementary school in Grade 4 in order to increase his exposure to the Japanese language and culture and to strengthen his connection with the local community. He subsequently entered a secondary school offering bilingual education in English and Japanese.

When asked how he felt about being able to speak several languages, Jacob described multilingual ability as “convenient”:

(11)

Jacob: “Well, it’s convenient. There are some situations where the person you’re talking to only understands one language. When we talk to Japanese people, some of them don’t know English. For example, some of my dad’s friends who live in Japan don’t know Japanese and ask me for help with legal documents because that’s in Japanese most of the time.”

Jacob’s father also describes how Jacob used both Japanese and English to mediate communication:

(12)

Interviewer: “What do you think Jacob thinks of being multilingual?”

Jacob’s father: “I think he enjoys it and is

a little proud because he’s able to speak Japanese as well as English. [...] In the football class, he used to translate the coach’s Japanese and explain the instructions in English to his friends. He took it as an opportunity and was happy about doing that.”

Both accounts concerned situations in which Jacob’s Japanese enabled him to assist others, whether by helping adults and peers. The following section considers these findings alongside Jacob’s language practices and meanings of the languages to him.

5. DISCUSSION

This study examined Jacob’s reported language practices involving Malayalam, English and Japanese across different settings and interlocutors, as well as the meanings he associated with his languages. The findings show that his use of three languages varied according to both setting and interlocutor. More importantly, the meanings associated with his languages, however, could not be understood simply in terms of the frequency or range of use. The language portrait and oral explanation made these distinctions and meanings particularly visible. Busch (2018) explains that visual representation enables multiple elements to be presented simultaneously, directing attention both to the portrait as a whole and to relationships among its elements. In Jacob’s portrait, Malayalam was represented as the colour of his skin and “real colour”, English as an “outer shell”, and Japanese as clothing, which he explained when speaking with most people in Japan.

The strongest contrast in Jacob’s portrait was between Malayalam as the colour of his skin and English as an “outer shell”. This distinction did not straightforwardly correspond to the frequency or range of his language use. He used English in a wide range of settings, including schools, church, and in communication with extensive friends from different linguistic backgrounds. It had therefore considerable educational and social significance. Nevertheless, Jacob represented it as surrounding outside of his body rather than as part of his inside body. Jacob’s extensive use of English constant

with previous studies that have described the importance of English-medium schooling among Indian families in Tokyo (Inoue, 2021; Wadhwa, 2021). The present case adds to this broader account by showing that the functional significance of English did not necessarily correspond to its position in Jacob's self-representation.

Malayalam, by contrast, was used across a limited range of setting, primarily within the family at home and the Malayali community in Japan and occasional visits to India. Yet, Jacob associated it closely by describing Malayalam as his skin, his "real colour", and the language that represented most of himself; he connected it to family relationships, comfort, his origins, and the maintenance of his culture. Busch (2018) notes that language portraits may structure linguistic experience through bodily and spatial metaphors, including contrasts between internal and external. The present case further shows that personal meanings associated with a language do not necessarily correspond to its frequency, range of use, or practical importance in everyday life.

Japanese was represented across a large area in the portrait, mainly as the figure's clothing. In his oral explanation, Jacob described it as the language he used when speaking with most people in Japan. Unlike Malayalam, which was represented as the colour of his skin, and English, which was represented as an outer shell, Japanese was represented less through his inner self or embodied self and more through his relationship with the surrounding social environment. At the same time, together with English, it enabled Jacob to take on a mediating role, for example by helping his father's friends with Japanese documents and translating his football coach's instructions for friends who needed explanations in English. Japanese therefore functioned both as language through which Jacob participated in the society around him and allowed him to facilitate communication between others.

Jacob's father's account provides a familial context for this representation. He described Malayalam as connected to Jacob's roots, identity, and cultural centre, and emphasised the family's conscious use of Malayalam at home. There was a clear

alignment that Jacob and his father associated with Malayalam, although the data do not establish that the father's beliefs directly produced Jacob's representation. Rather, his account indicates that the meaning that Jacob held for Malayalam was connected to a family environment that was explicitly connected to being Malayali and maintaining ties to Kerala.

Taken together, the findings show the value of interpreting a language portrait together with the participant's oral explanation. The visual arrangement made the relationships among the languages visible, while Jacob's oral account clarified the visual representation and connected them to his experiences. The language portrait and the interview provided complementary forms of data. The interviews provided accounts of language practices, and the language portrait and Jacob's oral explanation showed how he positioned the three languages in relation to himself and the surrounding social environment. Interpreting these materials together allowed the study to examine the meanings associated with the languages.

These findings may have implications for future discussions of language education by highlighting the importance of considering not only language use and proficiency but also the meanings associated with the languages in their repertoires.

6. CONCLUSION

This article examined the reported language practices of a 13-year-old boy and his father involving Malayalam, English and Japanese, as well as the meanings they associate with these languages. The findings showed that three languages occupied different functions and positions. English was used extensively in education and social interaction but was represented as an "outer shell". Malayalam was used in a more limited range of settings but was represented as Jacob's skin and his "real colour" and was closely associated with family, comfort, origins and culture. Japanese was associated with the surrounding environment that he participated in and Jacob's ability to mediate communication between others. These findings suggest that the frequency and range of language

use do not necessarily correspond to the significance that a language holds for an individual.

The study also illustrates the value of participants' activity of a language portrait involving reflecting on their own language repertoires and making oral explanations. The portrait made the relationships among the three languages visible, while Jacob's explanation clarified what different colours and parts of the figure represented. His father's account further provided a familial context for Jacob's representation of Malayalam. A longitudinal follow-up using repeated interviews and language portraits could examine how the family's language practices and the meanings associated with Malayalam, English, and Japanese develop and change over time.

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