INTERVIEW

A Cultural Anthropologist's Perspective on Heritage Language and Education: In Conversation with Neriko Musha Doerr

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Article Info	Abstract
	Neriko and Masashi share an interest in the education of heritage language speakers. Montrul (2016) defines a heritage speaker as "a bilingual speaker who grew up exposed to the heritage language and culture in the home and the societal majority language beyond the home, speaks the majority language fluently, and possesses productive or receptive ability in the heritage language" (p. 20). However, the conversation proceeded in a direction that criticizes how labeling practices are done by researchers and language educators, not by speakers themselves. Starting with Neriko's background as a cultural anthropologist, Masashi asked questions related to heritage language education, its research, and any future directions. The importance of interdisciplinary approaches was emphasized, the application of "unit thinking" in language that sees each language as internally homogeneous was critiqued, and the utilization of "integrationist linguistics" to capture the dynamics of fluid human communication activities across time and space was discussed. The conversation took place between participants in two different countries, Japan and the United States, and was conducted via a video conferencing platform on June 10, 2024.
Keywords	

Masashi: Good morning and good evening, Dr. Doerr Musha Neriko sensei[1]. Thank you for accepting our invitation to this interview meeting. What do you do as a scholar? How did you get into the field and get trained as the type of scholar you are now?

Neriko sensei: Thank you for this opportunity. As a scholar, I do three things. I do research, I teach, and I write, I publish. I did research in Aotearoa/New Zealand[2] for my PhD dissertation, looking into Māori language revitalization at school. I was looking at the school system where English was taught alongside Māori. They had a bilingual unit and a mainstream, only English unit. So, I looked into how institutional setup affects their self-image and self-esteem. That was my dissertation. When I came back to the U.S., I did some

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[1] Sensei is an honorific title that Japanese speakers utilize to show respect to Japanese speaking educators.
[2] Aotearoa is a Māori name for New Zealand and now it is included in the official name to reflect their official biculturalism.

research about similar language and education kinds of things, English as a Second Language classes at community colleges. And then I did research about Japanese as a heritage language education at weekend Japanese language school where my kids went. So, I dropped them off, and I did research there, in different classes. Throughout that time, I had been working with my friends who taught Japanese language at college. It was like writing together, collaborating, and things like that, too.

After that heritage language research, I moved on to do research on study abroad and civic engagement, like alternative break trips from colleges. I went with different study abroad groups, and I interviewed the students who studied abroad. And, I also went on alternative break trips to see what students learn on these trips, experiential learning trips. And I am now moving on to do a little bit of automobility. That is a very different field, but I am interested in how the drivers communicate with each other. That is along the lines of linguistic anthropology, though; I am interested in learning how your worldview changes as you learn how to drive. That is not so much about linguistic anthropology, but is more educational anthropology, like when you learn a new theory, how the world looks different, that type of stuff.

So, that is my research… I have been interested in experiential learning. I also do research in the classes I teach. It is more about pedagogy and experiential learning. The projects I do in class, what kind of reactions students have to them, are they aligned? I usually do class projects aligned with my ideas in educational anthropology. I am putting in practice what I preach, and then see how students react, and I get their input and try to adjust and things like that. So, teaching and research overlap a little bit. In terms of writing, I have been publishing in academia, but I am also trying to work with practitioners. For example, study abroad is a bigger field including practitioners, with their own conferences. There are a lot of practitioners. So, I want the practitioner to see what I am saying and incorporate it into their work.

I have done a little bit of workshop type of things. I wrote a book, like a guidebook for practitioners, but I wrote it a little differently. Right now, I am working with Japanese language teachers about how to teach Japanese language without imposing standardization, or standard Japanese, how to defy it while you teach the language. I have several theories, kind of trying to come up with some. And a lot of times, it was the same for study abroad too, but when I say something and the practitioners said, "Oh, that is interesting, but how do we do that in daily practice when we are teaching?" Things like that. It is very important for me to

work with people who actually do the teaching, who say that is practically impossible or that is possible. Or maybe, we just have to change the whole institution to start with, like, teaching a language course without naming it, like," Japanese language class." If the class is called "Japanese language class," it is very hard to get out of the concept that Japanese is a bounded unit. That is not really a framework we should be using. It is very important to work with practitioners.

I am also interested in writing children's books or writing songs. I started to learn how to write songs starting early this year; I want to reach out to a bigger public, especially when you talk about the Japanese language. I am trying to challenge the notion of standard Japanese as the only correct one[3], and I can do that with language teachers. And then as we discussed, I found out the more important place is teacher education, so that new Japanese teachers would have different ideas about the Japanese language, and what the Japanese language is about.

But then ultimately, it is the public and how they perceive the language. Even if you say, "Oh, it does not have to be standard Japanese that you speak," but when the student is speaking in Japan and people laugh at them, then that—you know, it does not really work. On top of writing in academia, it's like preaching to the choir, I want to write to the wider audience. Children's books, writing songs, and I know there are a couple of people like Tessa Morris-Suzuki—I think she is writing detective novels, like a detective mystery kind of thing—but it is based on Japanese historical periods. So, people read it and then they actually learn the history. But because they were interested in fiction, the detective story itself, they got it in a very different way.

You reach a very different audience. And like the book, *the Killer of the Flower Moon*— that recently became a movie with Martin Scorsese—they talk about Native American history from the early 20th century but made it into a detective story. So, it is based on fact, but because it is a detective story, it attracts a different audience and gets the same result that you wanted of spreading the word about historical events. So, I am kind of doing this double pillar of academic publishing and also reaching out to a wider audience.

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[3] Neriko sensei: I came up with the concept of "unit thinking." It is a worldview that the world is made up of discrete, bounded units that are internally homogeneous. Unit thinking relates to the modern nation-state ideology of one nation, one people, one culture, one language, but that ideology created more of what I call "normative unit thinking" that homogenize people by imposing one shared ideal but also hierarchically differentiate people based on their proximity to the ideal. That hierarchization is the problem I want to challenge, and it shows in standard language where "dialects" are devalued.

Masashi: Thank you. So, the reason why you initially started working on Japanese heritage speakers is your children?

Neriko sensei: It is not an academic reason, but it is still related to my interest in language education. Originally—I might be kind of going ahead—I went to Cornell to get my PhD, and my dissertation advisor was Benedict Anderson, whose specialty is in nationalism. I was actually very interested in nationalism, and language and nationalism are really tightly connected. And Japanese language school was very interesting to me because of that, how it is a virtual Japan in the middle of the U.S. It was so strange to go there once a week. You have this daily life in the U.S. with little Japanese things and go to this school and all of a sudden this [Japanese space appears]. It was a university classroom turned into like Japanese space for just one day a week, every week. And they put the posters up and things like that. So, as I was dropping my kids off, I felt like this was an interesting space that I should write about or, you know, learn more about. And that is how I got into studying Japanese language schools.

Masashi: Now, let me ask three questions about your research. The first question is about the term "legitimacy" which has been oftentimes used in your studies regarding heritage language education, especially between 2009 and 2016 (e.g., Doerr & Kumagai, 2014; Doerr & Lee, 2009, 2010, 2012, 2013, 2016). So, what does it mean in the field of heritage language education, and why is it important?

Neriko sensei: I know nowadays the word is used by Jae Allegra DiBello Takeuchi[4]. She talks about language legitimacy, which is very important. I love her work. But in terms of legitimacy at Japanese language schools, it was more about the students' perception. So, the concept of legitimacy, I think is like a concept of authenticity. The most important thing is who gets to decide, who gets to claim, "this is legitimate" and "this is not legitimate." So, to me, it is not so much I decide what is legitimate[5], but I would ask people what they think about what legitimate Japanese is.

I did research in two different classes. One is *kokugo[6]* education, which is using the Japanese public-school curriculum. You are supposed to be a "native speaker," in terms of your proficiency. The other group is heritage language—*keishogo*—school, which is a little

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[5] Neriko sensei: I do not think Jae does, either.
[6] *Kokugo* literally means "national language," but is the name for language art classes in Japan.

confusing because like you said in the beginning, the definition of heritage language in English is if you are learning a language that is not mainstream in the U.S., non-English. Then, you are a heritage language learner. But when you go to weekend Japanese language school, *kokugo* education—although in English, that is considered heritage language education—is not, because they are using a public-school curriculum from Japan, and they think they are doing language art education for "native speakers" as opposed to education that is for English-Japanese bilingual students learning Japanese language. And again, the students move back and forth. So, I do not want to say those students are "native speaker" students versus heritage language learners, because it is about pedagogy.

As for the *kokugo* education, they are teaching *kokugo* curriculum. The students could be varied. For the *keishogo* curriculum, they have their own curriculum that is flexible and keeps in mind that students speak English as well as Japanese, and they are not adhering to the *kokugo* curriculum. That is the main difference. But "how teachers teach" and "how the students are" are varied, and they move around a lot. [The student membership is] very fluid. So, legitimacy-wise, the way I use it was how students usually started in *hoshuko*, which is the *kokugo* education part, as a default, and when they try to move to *keishogo*, a lot of times, [the students say] "that is not good enough as Japanese education" type of thing. "It is for dropouts" and things like that. So, from the students' point of view, sometimes their parents' point of view, *keishogo* classes are not legitimate, but that is not what I think. It is how they see it and that kind of interferes with their decision regarding which classes they end up attending. That is how I see legitimacy.

Masashi: All my questions are related. The next question is about you and your colleague Lee. So, you and your colleague's 2010 study investigates how the notion of "Japanese-ness" is perceived by Japanese heritage speakers. Why did you work on this particular topic? And based on your research, how do you see the diversity of "Japanese-ness" perceived by Japanese heritage speakers themselves?

Neriko sensei: It has been a while. In the past, I wrote a specific piece where heritage speakers perceive Japanese very differently. I do not necessarily agree with it. Like, I am kind of totally against the concept of Japanese [as a bounded unit] to start with. But it is related to the legitimacy that the students feel that you have to be able to speak Japanese in the "native" proficiency, otherwise you are not Japanese. That was their perception. And other students feel like, "Oh, if you have a connection, if your ancestry is Japanese, if you feel you are Japanese, then you are Japanese." So, people feel differently about their connection to

"Japanese-ness." I am currently working on this concept of "unit thinking," which is to see things as bounded units that are internally homogeneous. That is like a nation state ideology where there is a nation called Japanese, language called Japanese, and culture called Japanese.

They are all kind of overlapping and homogeneous. There is a very clear-cut boundary. That is a kind of old-fashioned nation state ideology that we still carry on. Even if the researchers say, like, "Oh, there is no homogeneous Japanese," like Japanese is diverse, we end up using the word Japanese as if there is a unit and the boundary. So, the concept of Japanese itself is very problematic, I think. That is something that I want to move away from. And in a very radical way, just abandon the whole label Japanese. I mean, there is a Japanese citizenship, which is a clear-cut citizenship, but when it comes to language, there is no point of talking about bounded unit of language. And the same with people too. Like I was born and raised in Japan, but [now that I have been out of the country for many decades] I do not know if I am Japanese or not. It is an irrelevant question. Why do we have to decide?

I am moving towards just abandoning the name, and that kind of connects to some of the theories in linguistics that I really like. Like translanguaging, they talk about getting rid of "named language," but they always revert back to saying, "This sentence mixes English and French." So, you are using the named language, or they use phrases like, "features related to," "associated with Spanish," "the features associated with English." You are still kind of using the named language. I want to move away from it all. So, back then, I wrote the paper based on what the students or parents felt. This is a tricky thing. Like a lot of times, because I am an anthropologist, I interview people and see what they think, but a lot of times, I do not use that [what they say, like "Japanese" or what they view as legitimacy] as a concept, as an analytical term. I just see what they think, like a folk term, not an analytical term.

Masashi: Did you change your approach from that time to now?

Neriko sensei: No, not really. People use the word "Japanese," so then I still have to use it. I do not even like the concept of identity. It makes it static and does not help with thinking about power relations. I like the subjectivity. It is better because it has a subject being subjected to the category, and power relations are implied. But as anthropologists, we always quote the people whom we interview. The legitimacy is what they thought, and the concept of Japanese is what they thought. So, I never really believed in the kind of "legitimate language." I never believed that there is a group of people called Japanese. People who hold a

Japanese passport, yes. But as a kind of people, a category of people, no. Because, like even within a family, people are very different, right? It does not really make sense to say we are Japanese, we share something. We are forced to share certain things by going to the same school and learning the same thing. But we are still different. So, I do not really believe in the concept. I just use it, with quotation marks, quoting somebody saying they think they are Japanese.

Masashi: The last question related to your specific research is, again, about you and your colleagues' 2016 study. In this study, you and your colleague discuss hegemonic ideologies of heritage languages. Could you elaborate on this? And based on your study, what would be some practical approaches to facilitate heritage speakers' identity politics, although you just mentioned it is not something you want to talk much about.

Neriko sensei: What did I say [in that 2016 piece]? I think in my book I talked about how the concept of heritage language itself is constructed, because the world expects you to act this way, and there are different kinds of heritage language learner concepts.

Masashi: There is a specific quote at the end of your study, "Because heritage and hegemony can be two sides of the same coin, heritage language education should involve critical investigation of the heritage itself" (p. 124).

Neriko sensei: My understanding of heritage is that it is always constructed. So, somebody thinks this is heritage and other people might disagree. I was investigating what people think of as a "heritage." And I think in a different piece, I talked about Japanese "heritage" sometimes includes discrimination and racism against Zainichi Korean[7] people, for example. We kind of celebrate, "Oh, it is great to teach heritage," but we do not want to teach it so students can emulate that kind of heritage [though it is important to teach about the historical discrimination].

[I am moving on to another point here, but] what is considered as heritage? It is kind of like the concept of "the good old days." "The good old days" could have slavery present in it too, but you are selectively choosing certain parts of the past as a heritage. Heritage language education too. What is considered as heritage, what is not considered as heritage, what is considered as Japanese, what is considered as not Japanese, is all constructed. I am not saying "this is Japanese" and "this is heritage." I am trying to observe what people think of as what is heritage and what is not heritage. So, I do not really buy into the concept of heritage

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[7] Korean-Japanese

because, out of the million things that have happened, people select certain things as their heritage. I am interested in how people select what they do and how they select it. I am interested in what gives legitimacy to that selection.

Masashi: The way you explained the notion of heritage is that individual speakers have their own understandings of heritage, and it is important to ask them what it means?

Neriko sensei: I do not think researchers should assume what individual speakers think of as a heritage or what they think they are, who they are. We always have to ask them what they think and investigate why they think that way, what made them think that way. Who laughed at them, and if or why they changed their mind, stuff like that. We ask them instead of imposing our viewpoint of what is Japanese and what is not.

Masashi: My last question today is about future directions. What would the next steps be for you as a scholar and what would you expect of the fields related to education and multilingualism or heritage language? What would be a message for newer scholars like me who just entered the field?

Neriko sensei: Out of three questions, I am going to start with the easiest, the third one. For new scholars, there are several, like three things. I think the most important thing is you always have to start with the data. What you see and what you observe, as opposed to all these theories out there. Even when you write, you have a lot of data—I mean, that was my experience when I came back with tons of research data, and I did not know where to start. And then my advisor, John Borneman, gave me very good advice that I always share with other people. It is that you always start with the kind of data experience that struck you as odd. Like something strange happened, somebody said something in the field that made you go, "Oh, that is kind of weird." and then try to find the theories that explain it.

Then the concrete data becomes a focus, and you bring in different theories, try to explain it. And some theories do not really explain things well; you can criticize the theory and explain that it does not work in a real-life case. Some theories work better, though. That is how you judge the theories and situate your case. So, always start with the data, never from the theory. You do need to know the theories in order to figure out if your data tells us something new, something interesting. But it is always, "start with the data."

My second piece of advice is when you are reading literature, always go to the source. So, I know, especially in linguistic anthropology or social linguistics, I often hear, say like

post-structuralism, Michel Foucault, I read people citing Michel Foucault but really, they are citing a person who is citing Michel Foucault.

That is like a second or third step away from actual Foucault. Then it gets kind of skewed, and it becomes a little weird theoretically. So, if you want to use Foucault, if you want to use Bakhtin, if you want to use Volosinov, read the actual piece, and then you can understand it much better. You can understand where they [the original authors] situate their own theories [usually they write in relation to existing theories at the time, so Bakhtin is writing in dialogue with researchers of early twentieth century, for example, which is very important to know when you understand his theories. There are often certain assumptions they do not specify because it was obvious at the time] who their audience was [political environment at the time does affect what they are trying to say theoretically, too, like writing during Nazi regime is occurring in Europe or during the Vietnam War], what they are trying to say, as opposed to somebody picking and choosing what they thought was important. If you rely on such second-hand summary of a work, it becomes a very strange thing. I actually have my own experience of my work. When I publish about study abroad, I say immersion is not good, do not use the concept of immersion, do not encourage immersion. And then I see somebody quoting me saying, "Neriko Doerr supports immersion." Like, where did that come from? You know, like somebody misunderstood it. And then they just keep citing that misunderstood version. So, always go back to the original source. That is very important as a scholar.

The third one, be interdisciplinary, read literature from different fields. A lot of times, somebody else in a different field said something very similar—there is a whole field out there that is very useful. About five or so years ago, I found out cultural geography has been doing something very similar to anthropology, which was very interesting, but I never knew. A whole new field opened up to me. And then with it, whole new journals and places to publish too. There are whole new and different groups of people to interact and be in dialogue with who have different intuitions, and different perspectives. That is very helpful. So, be interdisciplinary. And the fact that I started out as an anthropologist, but then I ended up doing language and education, and I learned a lot from learning different sets of traditions, like scholarly traditions, argument and research, and perspectives. That is always very helpful. So, do not stay with like, one thing. And then a lot of times, somebody else has said the same thing already somewhere else that would actually help you with your analysis. So, that is my advice for the new scholars.

As for new directions, I am very interested in a field called integrationist linguistics by Roy Harris. This is a group that I did not really know about until very recently. I read about it through Alastair Pennycook's work; I do not think it has been used enough. But the whole idea is that there is no such thing as language. There is no such thing as grammar, and there is no such thing as meaning of a word except for at the actual time of conversation. So, that is kind of similar to Volosinov's idea, the Bakhtin circle's idea.

The concept of integration is that communication is one event that has a lot of things involved. The linguistic words are only part of it. So, for example, if I ask somebody to shut the window and then the person shuts the window, linguists will say this "can you shut the window?" statement as a statement and then take it out of the context and analyze it. But in reality, the communication works because the person is standing near the window, the person knows what the window is, the person knows what shutting means and they will shut the window. They might not say anything, but they just shut the window. The action itself is a response to my request. So, the whole thing is an event. Taking out the statement of "can you shut the window" is really missing the whole point of the communication practice.

Integrationist linguists say that you have to actually see the whole thing. So, then it does not make sense to say, when I say "shut," what it means out of context. And comparing it with other context that I said "shut" does not really make sense. So, you always have to go with the actual data of the actual communicative event. It kind of connects to that. My advice to the new scholars that you have to go with the data, not the grammar rules, applies here, too, because these grammar rules came after the fact. Interactions and communication have been going on for millennia. We always did that. And linguists came out and said, "Okay! Let us find the rules to this." That is why people often say, "native speakers," they do not know the grammar because grammar came later, and it might be wrong because grammar has to always catch up with whatever conversation we are doing.

For the future of the field, I think that is the most important, most accurate description of how language works. If you think that, we would not be talking about Japanese or we would not be even naming the language, we would not even be saying multilingual. Because multilingualism means you are counting the language, the Japanese, French, English, but there are no clear boundaries. We always borrow each other's language. So, I am hoping that integrationist linguistics becomes the future, although I do not know if it is going to happen. It has been around for a while. I read Roy Harris's piece from the 90s, and it has been 30 years, and I still do not hear too much on the ground, like in the language education area. So,

I do not know. But I am hoping that integrationist linguistics will become mainstream in linguistics, and we stop using unit thinking. Like translanguaging, people talk about "linguistic repertoire," people talk about concepts and things like that, but then they always revert back to "Spanish" and "English" and things like that, the "named language."

I am hoping that we somehow break out of that and just talk about how people communicate. That is why I am interested in driver's communication because we do not name the driver's communication as "that is a Boston language" or "a New Jersey language," but we communicate anyways. And it is very important so that we can avoid accidents, right? Drivers need to be communicating and it is not a trivial thing, but we do not need that name to describe those kinds of communicative practices. So, I am hoping that our understanding of regular language will be like that, too. Although it is difficult because this nation-state ideology, the whole entire world and political system, all that is based on the idea that language is named as a kind of internally homogenous unit. I am hoping somehow, at least at the scholarly level, we can move out of that modernist thinking of nation-state ideology. I do not know how it can become a reality, but I am hoping that it will be the future.

Masashi: I think that concludes our interview. Thank you so much again for taking your time and sharing your experiences and insights. I appreciate it so much.

THE AUTHORS

Neriko Musha Doerr ⬤ received a Ph.D. in cultural anthropology from Cornell University. Her research interests include politics of difference, language and power, civic engagement, and education in Japan, Aotearoa/New Zealand, and the United States, with special focus on language education, study abroad, and automobility. Her publications include *The Native Speaker Concept* (Mouton de Gruyter), *Heritage, Nationhood, and Language: Cases of Migrants with Japanese Connections* (Routledge), *Constructing the Heritage Language Learner: Knowledge, Power, and New Subjectivities* (Mouton de Gruyter), *Rethinking Language and Culture in Japanese Education* (Multilingual Matters), *The Global Education Effect and Japan* (Routledge), *Fairies, Ghosts, and Santa Claus: Tinted Glasses, Fetishes, and the Politics of Seeing* (Berghahn), *The Politics of "Incompetence": Learning Language, Relations of Power, and Daily Resistance* (Lexington Books), *Counter Standardization: Exploring Liberatory Language Practices around "Japanese"* (Mouton de Gruyter), and articles in various peer-reviewed journals. She teaches at Ramapo College in New Jersey, U.S.A.

Masashi Otani ⓘ is a Lecturer in the Language Education Center at Nagoya University. He earned his Ph.D. in Curriculum and Instruction with a specialization in ESOL/Bilingual Education from the University of Florida. Masashi was also an elementary teacher education program instructor and a *hoshuko* (weekend Japanese language school that teaches *kokugo* curriculum) teacher while he was in the United States. His passion to advocate for multilingual learners in PK-12 contexts was a driving force to navigate his life while living away from home. Now, Masashi is back in Japan. Regaining the societal majority language speaker status, but with more multilingual and transnational awareness, he looks at the world differently. Masashi's current research interests include not only Japanese heritage speakers but also minority language speaking residents in Japan. As a multilingual education practitioner, he is a consultant to multiple NPOs that promote multiculturalism in Aichi Prefecture.

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