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**Japanese Women's Desire for English: English Language Ideologies and Deconstruction of  
the *Akogare* Myth**

Summary of the Dissertation

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## Project Outline

The past three decades have shown a great interest in researching Japanese women's desire for English and the West, both romantically and professionally (Kelsky, 1996; 2001; Bailey 2006; Piller & Takahashi, 2006; Nonaka, 2018). However, it is necessary to revisit the existing research in the current framework of the feminist philosophy of desire to explore whether the dominant conceptualizations of Japanese women as heterosexual self-colonizers consuming Western products still prevails. Moreover, through the critical assessment of the fallacies of the existing scholarship, my project also suggests some new analytical trajectories based on the theoretical assumptions of desire as a philosophical concept to pursue a more profound understanding of desire consistent with the 21<sup>st</sup> century transnational, non-binary, and non-phallogocentric feminist thought.

The purpose of this interdisciplinary study is to rethink the concept of desire in the context of feminist philosophical thought, arguing for the more complex model of Catherine Malabou's plasticity, i.e., desire for English is plastic, hinging on fluidity and thereby constituting malleable subjects in discourse. To do so, the study will allocate the concept of desire in the contemporary setting of the cultural group of young Japanese women to demonstrate its explanatory force regarding the formation of these female subjectivities shaped in and through their desire for English. Japanese women desiring and mastering English emerge as relevant actors in the narratives of mobility and internal change.

Critical ethnography was selected as a methodology based on the twenty-eight interviews with English-speaking Japanese women and the observations generated from the two fieldwork trips to Japan in 2019 and 2022. Analyzing the data, the study argues that the cultural setting of Japan and that of the specific group of young Japanese women is a significant pointer to how this desire can be understood within an interdisciplinary framework.

That considered, this dissertation contends that, despite its limited ability to comprehend the concept of desire fully, the ideology of *akogare*<sup>1</sup> (longing) remains prevalent in the contemporary Japanese English language market. Such a desire has also been identified in the

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<sup>1</sup> Verb [あこがれる] akogareru means to long for; to yearn after; to admire; to be attracted by; Akogare as a noun [あこがれ] defines yearning; longing; aspiration (Preston 2007).

narratives of some of my research participants, illustrating the desire oriented towards the achievement of goals, the West and Western lifestyle in this context. Apart from the relevance of the akogare ideology, it is also found that Japanese women's desire for English is changing. This desire is plastic and transformative; it hinges on fluidity and constitutes malleable female subjects in discourse. Japanese women desiring and mastering English play significant roles in their narratives of mobility and internal change.

### **The Structure of the Dissertation**

The dissertation is organized into six constituent chapters. Chapter 1, "Contextualizing English Language Learning in Japan," provides an explanation for the language ideologies pushing people to learn English in Japan. The historical background of Japanese Westernization will serve as a starting point to locate the emergence of these ideologies. From Edo and Meiji Eras to the postwar discourse on language learning, it will be shown how learning English in Japan has been greatly influenced by the idea of fascination with the West and eventually perceived as a result of the Orient/Occident binary. To adequately address the questions of desire and language ideologies in Japan, the literature review will be divided into two sections. The first part will critically reflect on the theories of Japaneseness, particularly focusing on Japanese ideologies of uniqueness and homogenization. Driven by postcolonial and poststructuralist modes of thinking, the second part of the literature review will focus on the critique of the aforementioned discourse of Japanese homogeneity, particularly in terms of the question of gender. It will be shown that in the works criticizing Japanese homogeneity and proposing more liberal (Westerncentric) modes of living, desire plays a crucial role; however, the desire is discussed via the concept of akogare, reducing it to the meaning of longing and lack. Thus, the last part of the chapter will expose the limitations of the limitations of akogare ideology in contemporary Japan as well as emphasize its omnipresence in earlier studies.

Chapter 2, "The Feminist Philosophy of Desire," starts by pointing out the immanent ambivalence between the concepts of desire and pleasure in feminist theory. The chapter elaborates on the ways the concept of desire is understood as plastic from a feminist perspective and how it relates to the learning of English. This philosophical framework exposes the masculinist tendencies in conceptualizing desire and argues for an approach that incorporates the fundamental concepts of Spinoza and Deleuze and Guattari within the feminist framework

developed by Catherine Malabou, who foregrounded the notion of pleasure that has the potential to challenge existing patriarchal norms in academic investments in desire as “lack.”

Chapter 3, “Methodology,” outlines the primary goal of the research, discussing the desire for English in the context of a marginalized group of Japanese women and discussing critical ethnography as the research method for gathering data. The chapter argues for the relevance of the Research Questions and introduces the primary woman participants in my interviews. Lastly, the analytical steps and the criteria of validity are established.

The findings of the study are organized into three chapters (chapters 4 to 6, respectively). Chapter 4, “Akogare for English,” focuses on explaining the emergence and the pertinence of the ideology of akogare in contemporary Japan. The first part of the chapter provides an interpretative context for the entire ideology of akogare and elaborates on the findings based on my field notes from the foreign settlements in Kobe, Nagasaki, and Yokohama. Providing a historical outlook on the prominence of the Western culture and infrastructure in Japan highlights the importance of Western ideology for Japan. The second part of the chapter elaborates on the very discourse of akogare and the reasons behind it, specifically focusing on its role in the practices of English language learning and teaching in Japan. I argue that the reasons behind the emergence of the akogare discourse are two-fold: the idealization of the West and the perception of Japanese and Asian non-English speakers as backward. The specificities of the dominant discourse, based on the critical voices in the specific interviews in my study, are Japanese homogeneity, lookism, and patriarchy.

Chapter 5, “Changing Ways of Learning English in Japan,” provides a more practical assessment of akogare ideology and discusses the means of English learning among a particular group of Japanese women. Outlining the very means of learning/teaching a foreign language, this chapter also illustrates the shift the entire English language market in Japan has gone through. It highlights the shift from what I consider traditional ways of learning/teaching English – learning materials (textbooks, CDs, etc.), actual in-person classes from foreign teachers (primarily native speakers) in Japan, and studying abroad (*ryūgaku*) – to novel ways of learning/teaching English, such as taking lessons from the teachers whose native language is not English, and more affordable ways as online learning, and using certain web services (language exchange apps or even dating apps). As a result, the perpetuated akogare ideology is countered by the

consequences effected by the novel ways of learning the language and the different understanding of the desire for English in Japan.

Chapter 6, “Beyond the Confines of Akogore,” reflects on changes my participants singled out after their learning of English. The changes discussed here are of individual and collective nature. Adopting the philosophies of Deleuze and Guattari, as well as Catherine Malabou, the chapter demonstrates how the concepts of becoming and plasticity have crucial roles in understanding desire as transformative and leading to its own proliferation. English language learning is addressed not as a matter of learning of language per se but as a medium of character and life plan change. Lastly, stemming from the conceptual framework discussed in the theoretical chapter, the new desires are explored as parting with the discourse of akogare and in agreement with the ideas of plasticity. Articulating desire as a rhizomatic force, desire is seen to have the potential of shaping one’s subjectivity and creating oneself anew.

### **The Results of the Dissertation**

As per the research findings, the study revisited the philosophical concept of desire and reconceptualized it as plastic and transformative in the context of feminist philosophical thought, challenging its earlier interpretations as lack or mere longing. Desire was argued to be fluid and potent in an ongoing dynamic process of formation, affective, with its own proliferation as its sole ‘purpose.’ Through the analysis of my fieldwork data, the interviews, and fieldwork notes, the dominant concept of akogare (longing) was deconstructed.

The data showed that the discourse of akogare was still prevalent in Japanese cultural settings. For instance, looking into the fieldwork notes from the visits to the foreign settlements of Kobe, Nagasaki, and Yokohama attest to the pertinence of the akogare myth in Japan through the preservation of the remains of these Western settlements, additionally monetizing through their touristic value. Regarding the participant interviews, akogare was located in the stories of those participants reflecting on the English ideologies in Japan as either inspired by the idealization of the West or denigration of non-English speaking Japanese and other Asian counterparts. Thus, akogare was found in the experiences of those women criticizing Japanese homogeneity, lookism, or patriarchy (which immanently resulted in prioritizing the West) and in the emergence of global human resource (a Japanese project of inspiring younger workers’

upward mobility by fostering their competitiveness on the global level, English being the key asset).

At the same time, and more importantly for my project of critical reflection, this akogare ideology was also countered through the narratives of my participants, who, doing so, challenged the establishment of the ideological meanings of the English language in contemporary Japan. Following the trends brought by globalization and technological change, it was found that the main shift in akogare ideology came through the deconstruction of the superiority of the white native teacher and the selection of a more affordable method of learning English (online and through applications). Locating these instances in the participants' narratives, the very changes in desire were eventually observed, leading to the corroboration of the claims that desire is plastic and transformative. So, contrary to the common narrative hinging on the romanticization of the West via the English study, these women demonstrated a dose of insubordination against the limiting and binary constraints of akogare ideology. Emphasizing the intricate interplay of gender, language, and identity, these examples illustrate how the desire for English can be multifaceted and dynamic, transcending the simplistic dichotomy of Japan versus the West.

### **Publications Pertaining to This Dissertation**

1. Košinaga, Jelena. 2023. "Should I Stay or Should I Go? English-Speaking Japanese Women's Reasons for Staying in or Leaving Japan." *Budapest Monographs in East Asian Studies*, 137-156. doi: <https://edit.elte.hu/xmlui/handle/10831/88892>
2. Košinaga, Jelena. 2022. "Pleasure vs. Desire: Towards the Feminist Road of Catherine Malabou." *Acta Philologica*, 58. doi: 10.7311/ACTA.58.2022.7
3. Košinaga, Jelena. 2021. "Japanese Women's Desire to Learn English: Commodification of Feminism in the Language Market." *Asian Journal of Women's Studies*, 27:3, 406-424. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/12259276.2021.1968629>
4. Košinaga, Jelena. 2020. "The Nonunitary Identities of Japanese Women: The Conceptualization of Selves Through Implications of 'Investment' in English Language Learning." *The Esse Messenger*, 106-119.



## Other Publications

1. Košinaga, Jelena. 2022. "Review of Teresa Kulawik and Zhanna Kravchenko. *Borderlands in European Gender Studies*." In *Feminist Critique: East European Journal of Feminist and Queer Studies*. <https://feminist.krytyka.com/en/articles/borderlands-european-gender-studies-feminisms-postsocialist-europe>
2. Košinaga, Jelena. 2021. Review of Chisato Nonaka. *Transcending Self and Other Through Akogare [Desire]: The English Language and the Internationalization of Higher Education in Japan*. In *Japanese Studies*, vol. 41 (2): 264-267. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10371397.2021.1940899>
3. Košinaga, Jelena. 2021. Review of Zoltán Dörnyei. *Innovations and Challenges in Language Learning Motivation*. In *Eger Journal of English Studies*, vol. 20: 117-120. <https://doi.org/10.33035/EgerJES.2020.20.117>
4. Košinaga, Jelena. 2020. Review of Julia C. Bullock, Ayako Kano, and James Welker. *Rethinking Japanese Feminisms*. In *Asian Journal of Women's Studies*, vol. 26 (2): 267-272. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/12259276.2020.1770434>

## Conference Talks

2022. "Desires Interrupted: Escaping Japan in the Time of the Pandemic." *31<sup>st</sup> JAWS Conference: Research on Japan in the (post-)COVID-19 Era*. Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, 06-07 July.
2022. "Precarious Methodologies: Ethnographies of Japan in the Time of Pandemic." *Terrains japonais- Rencontres de l'Association interdisciplinaire des ethnographies japonaises*. Inalco/ University of Paris, 24-25 March.
2021. "Japanese Women's Desire for English: From the Orientalist Gaze to the Subversive Power of Decolonization." *15<sup>th</sup> ESSE Conference: Transnational Perspectives in Transnational Perspectives on European Feminisms*. Online, 30 August-3 September.
2021. "Japanese Women's Desire for English: Subversion of Collectivist Norms and Identity-In-The-Making." *16<sup>th</sup> International Conference of the European Association for Japanese Studies (EAJS)*. Online, 24-28 August.

2021. “Japanese Women’s Desire for English: Subversion of Collectivist Norms and Identity-In-The-Making.” *23<sup>rd</sup> Warwick International Conference in Applied Linguistics*. Online, 29-30 June.

2020. “Japanese Women’s Desire for English: Articulations of Desire Across the Dimensions of Occidentalism, Commodity Feminism, and Decolonization of English Language Learning.” *ESSE Doctoral Symposium*. Online, August 31- September 02.

2020. “Japanese Women’s Desire for English: Subversive Potential of Women’s Internationalization of their Occidental Longings.” *Ph.D. Workshop for Doctoral Students in Japanese Studies in Central and Eastern Europe*. Japan Foundation, Budapest, Hungary, 31 January-02 February.

### **Teaching Practice**

2020-2021 Spring: Academic Composition, BA Seminar (teaching practice)

2021-2022 Spring: Introduction to English Literature and Culture 2., BA seminar

### **Fellowships And Grants**

2022. Toshiba International Foundation (TIFO) Fellowship Winner

—The Council of the European Association for Japanese Studies (EAJS) selected my research project and offered a Toshiba International Foundation Fellowship for a three-month stay in Japan. The fellowship was 7,000 EUR and was used for a two-month stay in Japan and completion of the fieldwork essential for the finalization of the doctoral project.

2020. ESSE Bursary Winner

—The ESSE Bursaries Committee approved my application and awarded me the ESSE Bursary for 2020. The amount of the bursary was 1.500 EUR. (due to the pandemic) was used to complete the fieldwork essential for the finalization of the doctoral project in 2022.

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