

To English with Love

Kimie Takahashi (2013) Language learning, gender and desire: Japanese women on the move. *Multilingual Matters*.

It's Valentine's Day today. Valentine's Day is a truly global event inextricably linking the emotional life of individuals with the capitalist world order. Young women around the world dream of romantic love and many men do their best to meet those dreams, showing how much they care by buying flowers, chocolates, lingerie, jewellery or any of the other consumer goods that have come to symbolize romantic love. Those that do not engage in the consumption bonanza also find their lives touched by Valentine's Day: for instance, [an estimated 198 million red roses are grown specifically for Valentine's Day](#) and that's a huge amount of one particular crop to get ready, to harvest and to bring to market for one single day: [the socio-economic structure of whole counties in Kenya](#), Colombia or Ecuador has been changed to make way for this floral industry.

Given the deep connections between individual emotions and the socio-economic order, it is not surprising that English, too, has found its way into this mix. A timely new book, [Language Learning, Gender and Desire: Japanese Women on the Move](#)* by [Kimie Takahashi](#), explains exactly those connections.

Following a group of young adult Japanese women studying overseas in Sydney, the book shows how, during their teenage years, the romantic desires of these young women had been shaped by Hollywood movies and other popular media. Teenage crushes on media stars are nothing unusual and each generation seems to have their own idols. However, for the Japanese women in the study the pop stars they had teenage crushes on (men like Tom Cruise or Brad Pitt) had a salient characteristic: they were white native speakers of English.

As a result, they ended up making a deep emotional connection between romantic attractiveness, Whiteness and English. While they outgrew their teenage crushes, their desire for white English-speaking men lingered on.

As the study shows, this was not only an idiosyncratic romantic desire that the five women who were the study's main participants happened to develop. Rather, the association between learning English, going abroad and falling in love is actively fostered in many discourses promoting English language learning, from women's magazines to language school advertising. Indeed, teaching 'the language of love' – Relationship English or *Renai* English – has become a form of English for Specific Purposes that is addressed in specific language learning materials and courses.

In sum, a range of powerful media discourses worked to inculcate particular emotional sensibilities in these women, which included a conflation of going abroad, learning English, and romantic desires.

Once in Sydney, of course, a different reality quickly hit: establishing contacts and relationships with locals (and particularly the kinds of locals they desired) was far from easy; becoming fluent in English was not as easy as they had imagined it would be once they were in Australia; and few of the men they met conformed to the chivalrous image of Westerners they had formed in their minds.

Each of the participants has her own life story and had to face her own trials and tribulations in Sydney. However, their emotional experiences are deeply shaped by the role of English as both an object of desire and a consumer commodity.

If you are looking for some academic reading this Valentine's Day, [Language Learning, Gender and Desire: Japanese Women on the Move](#) is the one. [Don Kulick's](#) endorsement of the book sums up the reading experience you can expect:

Romance blossoms, hearts break, and lives change as Japanese women go troppo in the Antipodes and tell the author all about their dreams, adventures and experiences of learning English as a second language. This delightful book is the definitive answer to the question, 'Is the concept of "desire" useful to students of language?'. The ethnography is wacky, the analysis is insightful and the writing is engaging and crisp. An absolute must-read for everyone interested in language and desire, language and learning, and language and globalization.

Enjoy! And Happy Valentine's Day!

*In the interest of full disclosure: I was the supervisor of the PhD research the book is based on.



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