

# My bicultural child is starting to reveal his two faces

[William Lang](#) Oct 19, 2020



Home mode: Some children stick to one language at home, but do they also stick to one personality?  
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My 4-year-old Japanese-Scottish son is a fussy eater.

"But I don't like this chicken, Daddy," he protests at dinner.

His intonation and phrasing seem cute to me. I am tempted to take the offending chicken from his plate and let him subsist solely on white rice and salad, as he would like. But I resist, and tell him that his favorite sumo wrestler, Asashoryu, ate lots of chicken to make him strong, too.

My son switches to Japanese. "*Demo ore wa chikin ga kirai da!*"

He tells me that he hates chicken, attempting to sound rough and macho. Where did he learn the rough-sounding, masculine pronoun, "*Ore?*" I only speak to him in English, and all of his nursery teachers are women, and would presumably choose a different word for "I." We don't even have a television at home, from which he could plausibly have picked it up. He must have gotten it second-hand from another 4-year-old at his nursery.

Bringing up a child to be bilingual in Japanese and English is, in my experience, stressful. If I want general parenting advice, I can ask my mother.

"When will he stop biting me, do you think?" I ask.

"When you start biting him back," she answers, smoothly.

But who can I turn to for advice on raising a child in two different languages? I keep fearing that I'm making some fundamental error that may lead to problems in the future. What if he were to give up on one of the languages, and be unable to talk to his grandparents, or start elementary school well behind his peers? There should be a government manual for this.

Last year, my wife and I took our son to a city-organized interview designed to test whether a child has learning difficulties. Our son struggled to respond appropriately, and it was suggested to us that he had developmental difficulties. The test took no account of his unusual situation. He was hearing only English at home, yet the test was conducted in Japanese.

Our strategy has been to use only English at home, and to allow him to pick up Japanese at his nursery. Our son has been going to nursery for five days a week since before he was 1, and he has been exposed to both languages. For a while, the balance seemed to be 60–40 in favor of Japanese. He

would blurt out Japanese at home, and we would answer in English.

Then the pandemic hit, and we temporarily pulled our son out of his nursery. The balance switched to 70–30 in favor of English. He wasn't hearing any Japanese, and I became concerned that I was depriving him of something vital. We put him on a diet of Japanese YouTube videos as a short-term fix. He has now gone back to his nursery, and has settled down to roughly equal competence in the two languages. But he doesn't use them with the same face. His English is calibrated to wheedle and cajole a parent. His Japanese mimics the rambunctious and forceful expressions of his toy-stealing peers.

Perhaps it is only to be expected. I sound very different in my learned Japanese than I do in my native English, or so I am told.

A fax machine salesman comes to my door, and I dance around the topic of fax machines with him for 10 minutes, not quite willing to definitively say no to him in my polite, textbook Japanese. In English, my boredom and annoyance would have come through almost immediately.

So in the same way, I can only guess that our son's two faces are here to stay.

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