Lived Religion, Lived Translanguaging: Identity Formation Research in Japan through a Critical Phenomenological Approach

Yaeko Hori[1]

[1]Nagoya University of Business and Commerce, Japan

Abstract

Since the late twentieth century, identity research in applied linguistics has emphasized fluid and plural identities, often focusing on multilingual and minoritized individuals. Intersectionality has further supported this work by examining how language is implicated in socially and politically constructed categories such as nationality, race, gender, religion, and class. However, contemporary transnational conditions—including intensified ideological and religious tensions and the disruptions foregrounded during the COVID-19 pandemic—raise questions about how people experience continuity and ethical orientation amid fluid identities and shifting social positions. Drawing on longitudinal, rapport-based qualitative research in Japan, this paper introduces a phenomenology-informed conceptualization of identity as a "constituting self" and advances a critical phenomenological methodology. The study examines the lived experiences of two Catholic women, one Japanese and one Filipino, within a shared analytical frame. Rather than treating categories, labels, and binaries as fixed explanatory units, the analysis approaches them as shifting reference points through which participants interpret their lives across church and everyday contexts. The analysis traces disheartening and healing trajectories through which participants articulate what matters to them. These trajectories are interpreted as "lived religion," understood as a moral and affective orientation embedded in everyday practice, through phenomenologically narrated "lived translanguaging," encompassing sensual, emotional, linguistic, and non-linguistic meaning-making. Although small-scale, the study shows how a critical phenomenological approach can illuminate identity formation as an ongoing ethical becoming within transforming relational constellations. It also outlines directions for future identity research that attends to more-than-human relationality and the material conditions through which lived experience is sustained.

Keywords: *Human Identity Formation*, *Criticality*, *Phenomenology*, *Lived Translanguaging*, *Lived Religion*, *Posthuman*

Suggested Citation:

Hori, Y. (2025). Lived religion, lived translanguaging: identity formation research in Japan through a critical phenomenological approach. *Langkit Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities,* 14*(2),* 34-52.

Introduction

In recent decades, applied linguistics research on fluid and plural identities has advanced significantly, influenced by postmodern theories and critical perspectives on power (Pennycook, 2021). Emancipatory in focus, this work has largely focused on minority and multilingual individuals, particularly immigrants (Darvin & Norton, 2021). Within this context, the concept of translanguaging challenged fixed notions of "languages," blurring boundaries between linguistic and non-linguistic resources (García & Li, 2014). Studies from translanguaging perspective show how multilinguals co-construct hybrid linguistic identities online and offline by mobilizing modal and semiotic resources (Blackledge & Creese, 2017). Intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989) further provides a framework to analyze "oppressed voices" shaped by the interplay of language with other categories such as nationality, race, gender, and religion. In Japan, applied linguistics has examined multilinguals (Nakane et al., 2015), yet intersectional perspectives remain rare, and religion is often overlooked. Conversely, sociology and migration studies have applied intersectionality more directly to minorities within a "Japanese/majority vs. non-Japanese/minority" framework (Shimoji & Ishihara, 2022). Filipino scholarship on migrants specifically highlights the intersecting roles of nationality, religion, gender, and language (Docot, 2009; Jabar, 2015; Balgoa, 2017, 2024). These studies, however, tend to take existing binaries and categories for granted in their analyses.

As transnational phenomena evolved, ideological and religious conflicts, alongside ecological disruptions (exemplified by the COVID-19 pandemic), have intensified awareness of the differential embodiment of power and privilege. Scholars increasingly call for broader conceptualizations and methodologies (Iwabuchi, 2021; Darvin & Norton, 2021), advocating a non-additive intersectionality perspective (Levon, 2015).

This paper—grounded in longitudinal research in Japan (Hori, 2025)—responds to this need. The conceptual framework, informed by phenomenology, moves beyond the binary of a "fixed self" (modern essentialism) and "plural, fluid selves/social positioning" (postmodern constructionism). Instead, it presents a "constituting self" (Husserl, 1935/1970): an ongoing, embodied process of becoming-in-relation with its own historicity. As Čapek and Loidolt underscore, identity is not merely observed or re-identified but "something persistent in the way we experience" (2021, p. 223). This persistence—Husserl's "essence"—is central to examining what flows consistently amid diverse aspects of the self.

To this end, I developed a critical phenomenological approach as a non-additive framework for intersectionality. This approach inductively elucidates how research participants utilize binaries, categories, and labels, as well as those they create in their narratives, as reference points for interpreting life experiences within shifting, entangled relationalities (see Section 3). Against this backdrop, the central inquiry guiding this study is: How does identity formation come to be experienced as an embodied, constituting self—characterized by "life themes"—as people navigate life in Japan?

In what follows, Section 2 reviews identity-related literature and Filipino scholarship. Section 3 outlines the critical phenomenological methodology, interpretation process, and research questions. Section 4 provides background on context and participants, and Section 5 presents interpretations and analysis. Section 6 discusses key findings and implications, and

Section 7 concludes by extending them to applied linguistics and beyond.

Literature Review

In applied linguistics, criticality emerged in the 1990s, influenced by postmodern theories, addressing political and social issues by questioning taken-for-granted assumptions and reshaping methodologies (Pennycook, 2021). This shift moved the field away from essentialist views of language and learners toward multilingual perspectives. Identity research followed, transitioning from psychological conceptions of the "self" to sociological approaches that view learners as social beings whose fluid identities through social positioning are shaped by asymmetrical power relations (Darvin & Norton, 2021). Within the context of transnationalism (Vertovec, 2007), translanguaging theory emerged as a framework that challenged boundaries not only between languages (and dialects) but also between linguistic and nonlinguistic resources (García & Li, 2014). It has been applied in identity-related studies, demonstrating how multilinguals co-construct hybrid identities online and offline by creatively mobilizing linguistic, modal, and semiotic resources (Blackledge & Creese, 2017). More recent work has discussed translanguaging as a comprehensive concept to include subjectivity (e.g., Li, 2022; Hori et al., 2024; Sato & Fujita, 2025), though concrete methodological innovations in identity research remain underdeveloped.

Intersectionality has also gained prominence. Crenshaw (1989) introduced the concept to expose inadequacies in theories and practices that overlook Black women's compounded discrimination, arguing that inequalities arise through intersections of identity categories, including nationality, race, ethnicity, gender, language, religion, and class, often framed as identity politics. McCall (2005) distinguishes three approaches to examining intersections of power: anticategorical (rejecting categories), intercategorical (analyzing relations), and intracategorical (highlighting overlooked intersections). Applied linguistics has primarily drawn on intercategorical approaches to examine multilinguals' linguistic identities in relation to other categories (Block & Corona, 2014; Souza, 2016).

In Japan, applied linguistics has explored multilingual identities (e.g., Nakane et al., 2015), yet religion remains marginal within this body of work. By contrast, sociology and migration studies have tended to analyze minorities through the binary "Japanese vs. non-Japanese" (Iwabuchi, 2021), often employing intercategorical intersectionality. Even within these approaches, religion is seldom treated as central or explicitly linked to language (Shimoji & Ishihara, 2022).

Filipino scholars have made substantial contributions to research on Filipino immigrants in Japan, particularly women who arrived in the 1980s–1990s as "newcomers," distinct from earlier "oldcomers" from colonized regions. Their work often highlights intersections of nationality, gender, religion, and language. Jabar (2015) demonstrates how Filipino migrant women viewed church as a site of collective religious identity. Churches also functioned as sites of empowerment, particularly through English-language services and evangelization. Docot (2009) examined a training program for Filipino entertainers transitioning into English teaching, arguing their stories must be understood not only through home–host assimilation but also in relation to gendered and neocolonial discourses of transnationalism. Balgoa (2017), combining ethnography with in-depth interviews, examined a Philippine festival, using social semiotics analysis to show how migrants reconstructed national identity by reinterpreting cultural symbols like food and icons. Her interviews revealed fragmented identities shaped by regional origins, dialect diversity, and the shared use of Tagalog and English. These studies

are revisited in Section 5.

Despite these contributions, religion tends to appear either as a background variable or as a fixed identity marker, rather than as a lived, ethical orientation that actively shapes meaning-making, relationality, and self-understanding over time. This analytical tendency is particularly limiting in the Japanese context, where religious practices are often diffuse, syncretic, and embedded in everyday life rather than institutionally foregrounded.

Morgan (2007) problematizes the tendency to reduce self-understanding to fluid, plural "social positionings," a move that continually decenters individuals and risks overlooking embodied values that influence perception and language use. Levon (2015) similarly critiques approaches that treat categories as separate variables, advocating a non-additive intersectionality approach. Another gap, which I highlight here, is the tendency to focus on multilinguals (typically minoritized groups), while neglecting people ascribed as "monolinguals," "majority members," or those who do not fit neatly within such frameworks. This paper seeks to address these gaps.

Crenshaw has more recently reemphasized intersectionality as a "prism," cautioning against framing it solely as a problem of "them" or the "unfortunate other" (Steinmetz, 2020). This is especially relevant today, as transnationalism continues to evolve amid worsening ecological, ideological, and religious challenges that are differentially experienced by individuals. Scholars increasingly call for broader conceptualizations of identity formation and methodologies (Glick Schiller, 2012; Darvin & Norton, 2021; Iwabuchi, 2021). In response, I propose a phenomenology-informed conceptualization of identity as a "constituting self" with "essence" in navigating life (as outlined in the Introduction), alongside a critical phenomenological framework as the methodology, to which I now turn.

Methodological Framework

Starting from its philosophical foundations, phenomenology was developed by Edmund Husserl (1859–1938) as an alternative to positivist scientific paradigms, focusing on the structures of human experience—especially consciousness—and how meaning becomes available to us in lived experience. Central to Husserl's project is the claim that subjective experience is not secondary to perception but constitutive of it. Husserl introduced several key concepts. Intentionality refers to the directedness of consciousness: consciousness is always consciousness of something, and objects are experienced through this relation between the experiencing subject and what appears (Husserl, 1935/1970). Relatedly, the notion of horizon describes the background of implicit possibilities, expectations, and sedimented understandings that accompany any perception and provide reference points through which one's experiences are interpreted. Husserl further distinguished Erlebnis (lived experience: subjective, meaningful engagement) from Erfahrung (empirical observation), and Leib (lived body: embodied subjectivity) from Körper (observable body). Henceforth, in this paper, "lived" and "embodied" experience are used in their original phenomenological sense. That is to say, "embodied" refers primarily to lived (phenomenologically narrated) experience rather than to systematic observation of multimodal interaction. These principles challenge objectivist perspectives underpinning some traditional methodologies. Husserl's methodology, epoché, involves bracketing commonsense knowledge to access how phenomena appear in consciousness and form subjectivities, offering insights for inductively interpreting how participants constitute meaning.

As noted in Section 2, translanguaging contributed to the development of plural identities research in applied linguistics. Many studies apply Moment Analysis (Li, 2011), which examines translanguaging space (both psychological and social spaces) and often draws on observational and interview-based data. While Moment Analysis aimed to incorporate subjectivity beyond the pursuit of objectivity, some applications continued to use methods, such as observation, conversation and discourse analyses, and interviews, in ways that remained close to conventional methods formulaically combined to validate "objective truth" (Holliday & McDonald, 2020; Li, 2022; Hori, 2021; Hori et al., 2024). In fact, some studies that employ Moment Analysis acknowledge the indispensable role of the researcher's subjectivities in interpreting data (Zhu & Li, 2016). Hence, they refer to the notion of "double hermeneutics" (i.e., researchers interpreting participants' interpretations of their experiences), a philosophical concept emphasized in a contemporary phenomenological methodology, namely, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith et al., 2009). Yet, its philosophical underpinnings and relationship to conventional methods remain largely unexplored.

IPA, informed by Husserl's phenomenology, was established in applied psychology to maintain a phenomenological attitude throughout research—by attending to relations between parts and whole in producing thick description and iterative interpretation. What's more, "'[w]hole' is the researcher's ongoing biography, and the 'part' is the encounter with a new participant" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 34). In IPA, therefore, rapport is crucial in developing the researcher's interpretation, i.e., double hermeneutics. Its main method is in-depth interviews, which provide opportunities to interpret research participants' lived experiences, not to relive the past but rather to learn anew while immersing in it (Smith et al., 2009). IPA also encourages contextualizing interview data analysis with other sources through an iterative process to deepen the interpretation, called the hermeneutic circle.

Therefore, this study applies the comprehensive view of translanguaging in phenomenologically interpreting lived/embodied experience as a "constituting self" and presents an apt methodology, i.e., a critical phenomenological approach. Here, IPA is extended by explicitly incorporating researcher's self-reflexivity through subjective fieldnotes (Finlay, 2009) and "mutual intersubjective confirmation"—sharing interpretations with participants as an integral part of the hermeneutic circle (Nishi, 2011). Such adaptation remains rare in phenomenological research. Contextualization included ethnographic observations, fieldnotes (both objective and subjective/emotional), online/offline communication, and collected materials. This study thus critically reorients methodological attention toward lived experience as the site where intersecting forces are felt, negotiated, and interpreted over time.

The analytical procedure modified IPA's six-step framework as follows:

1. Reading and re-reading – Repeatedly reviewing transcripts;

[1]The six steps are 1. reading and re-reading, 2. initial noting, 3. developing emergent themes, 4. searching for connections across emergent themes, 5. moving to the next case, and 6. looking for patterns across cases (Smith et al., 2009, pp. 82-107).

2. Making notes – Instead of identifying "language(s)" and their intersections with other identity categories, annotating key moments while elucidating sensory, emotional, compositional (relationality), and spatiotemporal elements (the past, present, and future) (cf. McCarthy & Wright, 2004);
3. Making notes – Instead of identifying "language(s)" and their intersections with other identity categories, annotating key moments while elucidating sensory, emotional, compositional (relationality), and spatiotemporal elements (the past, present, and future) (cf. McCarthy & Wright, 2004);
4. Identifying emerging life themes – Identifying emergent subthemes and then elucidating a life theme around which subthemes revolve;
5. Interpreting through a translanguaging lens – Analyzing linguistic/non-linguistic expressions and shifting perceptions of binaries, categories, and labels;
6. Contextualizing data – Continuously situating analysis within other data;
7. Elucidating resonances – Identifying common tendencies across participants' lived experiences (see Sections 6, 7).

The following operational research questions (RQs) guided the interpretation and analysis presented in Section 5:

> RQ1: How do intersectional features manifest and transform in participants' lived experiences? (i.e., how and why categories, labels, and binaries are sustained, adapted, or created in self-expression);
>
> RQ2: What roles do named languages and linguistic features play in expressing and interpreting lived experiences?
>
> RQ3: What is a life theme?

The next section contextualizes this methodology by overviewing the research setting and introducing the participants.

Research context and research participants

Japan, often perceived as a homogeneous nation, is an archipelago of 14,125 islands shaped by successive waves of migration. However, the ideology of a "homogeneous nation" endures, constructed through a binary narrative of "Japanese vis-à-vis non-Japanese" (Iwabuchi, 2021), rooted in Japan's dual historical roles as colonizer and colonized. In recent decades, the government has promoted "Japanese multiculturalism" without formal immigration policies, with local municipalities supporting "foreign residents" as community members, often through Japanese language programs (Guarné & Yamashita, 2015).

This study draws on data collected in one such local city between 2019 and 2023. Moving beyond the "majority/Japanese vs. minority/non-Japanese" binary, it focuses on two research participants (RPs)—one Japanese (RP1) and one Filipino (RP2) — within a shared analytical frame. Both have lived in the city for more than thirty years. RP2 came as a "newcomer" on an entertainment visa during the economic bubble, a period that geopolitically aligned with Ferdinand Marcos's "internationalization" policy in the Philippines. Notably, both attended the same church but were unacquainted prior to the study.

Given the significance of the religious context, a brief historical overview of Japan is warranted. Shinto, the oldest indigenous belief system, initially clashed with Buddhism in the sixth century. Over time, they coexisted through a syncretic tradition known as *shinbutsu-shūgō,* which persisted in various forms. Christianity entered Japan through Catholic missionaries in the sixteenth century; Protestant missionaries followed after the 1858 Japan–U.S. Treaty of Amity and Commerce. Today, Japan's religious landscape is marked by syncretism and the proliferation of various sects (cf. Yoshie, 1994), though their acceptance is often complex and contested. As the researcher, my background spans Buddhism (my family's religion), Shinto (my husband's family religion), and Christianity (through Protestant and Catholic schooling), perspectives that inform the interpretive processes discussed below.

Interpretation and Analysis

The interpretation and analysis primarily draw on data from the initial interviews conducted in late 2020 during Japan's second and third waves of the COVID-19 pandemic, supplemented by online/offline correspondences and fieldnotes. Final interviews were conducted in 2022, during the eighth wave.

To safeguard participant privacy, identifying details have been anonymized; transcriptions include both verbal and relevant non-verbal expressions (where available).

The following symbols are used in the transcripts:

- Prolonged silences: (…)
- Non-verbal expressions synchronized with speech: {e.g., smile}
- Hand gestures: RH (right hand), LH (left hand), BH (both hands), with double underlining indicating duration
- Privacy-related omissions or space constraints: (omission)
- Translations or contextual clarifications: < >
- Loanwords or foreign terms, including those written in katakana in the Japanese writing system—which absorbs loanwords of any linguistic origin except those from Chinese—are italicized.

Due to space limitations, Japanese transcriptions are omitted, except for key terms and life themes. Numbers in parentheses correspond to the interview transcription (with F for final interviews). The analysis is written in the first person ("I") to highlight the researcher's

[2] Simply put, when Japan was on the side of "(imperial) colonizers", the Japanese government tried to expand the Japanese empire to the neighboring regions. After Japan went through the side of "colonized (or occupied)" by surrendering to the U.S., the government concentrated on building a democratic nation state (cf. Guarné & Yamashita, 2015).

[3] *Shinto* came to be considered the national religion during the World War periods, leading to the regretful consequence of Japanese colonialism. Following the occupation by the United States after WWII, *Shinto* was separated from politics (Article 20).

interpretative role. For clarity, subheadings use identity categories and labels followed by a question mark, highlighting the complexity of identity formation.

Research participant 1(RP1): a Catholic, Japanese, female, in her 50s (?)

While searching for a research site, I visited RP1's herb and aromatherapy shop. Upon learning she was a Christian, she invited me to her church. We began attending mass and events together, and with the priest's endorsement, the church became the research site. RP1 volunteered as a participant, though some Japanese members labeled me "not Catholic" and expressed concerns about my use of English potentially compromising "foreigners'" privacy. To address this, I stopped video and photo documentation within the church, focusing instead on fieldnotes (later termed the "just being there approach") and adopting a process consent approach (cf. Van den Eynden et al., 2011).

RQ1: How do intersectional features manifest and transform in participants' lived experiences? (i.e., how and why categories, labels, and binaries are sustained, adapted, or created in self-expression)

Initially, I identified three subthemes related to "crises" after moving to her husband's hometown. The first crisis was *atopi* in katakana writing system (atopic symptoms in English) (46-50), in addition to *kafunsho* (hay fever) (60). She attributed the causes to the overwhelming power of the environmental change, and uttered, "just helpless" (60). The second one was *puchi utsu* (a combined expression she created; *puchi* deriving from "petite" in French and the Chinese character 鬱 representing "depression"). She listed various symptoms such as "with no friends, no play, and no fun" (96), "babies don't talk" (99), and " (…) tears streaming on my cheek" (102), without mobilizing the medical category, "postpartum depression". She considered the situation unfair, "just because I am a 'woman,'" foregrounding the gender category. The third crisis was the "evil online space," where she faced malicious comments after opening her shop (292-302). To cope, RP1 envisioned a duality: "the lower/inner, spiritual, and sensual world" and "the upper/external, manifested world". She explored Western and Eastern healing practices (aromatherapy, shiatsu, mindfulness), engaging with their sensory dimensions and incorporating linguistic features from Latin, Greek, French, and Chinese. foregrounding the gender category. The third crisis was the "evil online space," where she faced malicious comments after opening her shop (292-302). To cope, RP1 envisioned a duality: "the lower/inner, spiritual, and sensual world" and "the upper/external, manifested world". She explored Western and Eastern healing practices (aromatherapy, shiatsu, mindfulness), engaging with their sensory dimensions and incorporating linguistic features from Latin, Greek, French, and Chinese.

[4] The pandemic began in January 2020. The second wave saw a rapid rise in infections due to economic resumption, thus another strictest governmental self-quarantine measures was implemented in early 2021 (third wave).

[5] Full data cannot be shared for ethical reasons, but de-identified supporting materials and analytic clarification can be provided upon reasonable request where permissible.

[6] The lexicon of the Japanese language comprises roughly two-thirds of loanwords and one-third of words of Japanese origin; *kango* (Chinese origin), and others through contacts with other countries. Three main scripts are ideographic characters (*kanji*) originally from China and two phonetic scripts, *hiragana* and *katakana* (cf. Gottlieb, 2005).

[7] The first formal interview was held online on November 11th, 2020 (for approximately 80 minutes),

and the final online interview on November 25th, 2022 (approximately 180 minutes).

Nevertheless, she said it was "God" who truly helped her by deploying a metaphor, "I am an employee and God is like 'my CEO'" (180). She illustrated the bible study group she joined, "<they> say, please talk about anything, (…){smile}, but, you must not say 'that was good' or 'that was bad" (402). She remarked, "{smile} a safe place, BH you can talk about anything, wow I never knew there was such a place, I thought {smile}" (406). Eventually, despite their family's religion, Buddhism, she was baptized with her husband's full support and became a Christian. When I asked about changes since baptism, she replied, "Absolutely, after all, I do not have to be receiving everything" (428); "It is just so comfy, like that {smile}" (434). Notably, as I/the researcher experienced, she too was treated as "an outsider (not local)" by some Japanese members and felt "a sense of minority." This shows that even within the framework of "the Japanese/majority," there exists a dividing power that excludes some through othering by 'labels'. However, she did not mind because she had "a direct line to God" (348, 350).

RP1 also has a salient relationship with nature/ecology and is deeply concerned about—and fearful of—global warming (1177). In fact, she has volunteered for beach cleanups for years (1402). She noted that during the Covid pandemic, trash declined drastically, feeling the air as "serene, permeating her lower (internal/spiritual) sphere" (1404). Additionally, she recognized the good side of online space because "Wi-fi" as an invisible resource enabled her to remain connected online to her customers (1406).

RQ2: What roles do named languages and linguistic features play in expressing and interpreting one's lived experiences?

She is very articulate, regularly using and creating words and metaphors from different origins, deriving from her expanding repertoire. She mentioned named "languages"—"English" (991-1003), "French" (943, 945), and "Chinese" (971)—but saw them pragmatically as common languages in interacting with foreign people in business or travel.

More crucially, she cared less about differences between named languages than about how one externalizes emotions/thoughts from the friendly duality viewpoint. She explored how *labu* (in katakana, "love" in English) matters in expressing words (1031). She emphasized the roles of facial expressions and gestures (1033, 1041) and emphasized the delivery. As if she was going back and forth talking to herself and to me, she murmured, "BH How to talk mildly and kindly" (1043), adding, "So, language, yes, language, but, human language, how to play it like a harp {smile}" (1047). These excerpts capture her attempt to explain meaning-giving process from the lower to the upper—through "intentionality" sustained by *labu* (love)," while she sought suitable expressions to me, "mildly and kindly," "talk slowly {smile}" and "play it like a harp {smile}" with both-hands gesture. Though claiming she "only speaks Japanese," her embodied linguistic and non-linguistic features—as phenomenologically narrated and interpreted through interview interaction and longitudinal correspondence—suggest forms of lived translanguaging that complicate the label 'monolingual.'"

After the first interview during the contextualization process, probably sensing my uncertainty about her choice of becoming a Christian from Buddhist, she sent me an email:

> *Buddhism is like an app already installed, besides my soul, when I was born. So, it has always been close to me. (omission) That app is fully functioning even now. But Catholicism is something "I" installed myself, therefore, for some reason, all the paintings, goods, music, suit me, my senses, very comfortably (2/2, 2021).*

Her use of the metaphor "installation" for Buddhism and Christianity/Catholicism resonated with me, reflecting her gentle externalization of thoughts and emotions, akin to playing a soothing melody on a harp for me—through her "lived translanguaging." I consequently realized that her religious features are part of her repertoire, entwined with other features of her own historicity—"lived religion"; and I noted in the fieldnote, "I also have religious features that I embodied through my lived translanguaging, that resonated with hers" (2/11, 2021).

RQ3: What is life theme(s)?

The initial life theme I elucidated from the first interview through the iterative contextualization process was, "Pursuing equilibrium in mind/body by enriching and nurturing dual dimensions from the below of the duality." In the final interview, when I shared this interpretation with RP1, she hesitated. She said she felt she needed to include "God" but did not know how. She then uttered that she wanted to include *holisutikku* ("holistic" in English, recently added to katakana) in the theme (F283, F285). She further reflected, "after all we are just dots in the universe, I am green and you, blue, maybe" (F289), "we are reciprocal" (F291). She added, "I do not have to say 'God'; *Somusingu greito* ('something great') would suffice."

After the interview, RP1 sent a LINE message (a communication app popular in Japan) proposing, "Receiving and discharging pleasant vibrations as part of holistic harmony: embraced by something great." I adopted this as her life theme because her words captured her moral pursuit—a persistent resonance in her lived experience, encompassing human and non-human relationalities. Her email, titled "Beyond dimensions (*Jigen wo koete*) ♪," affirmed that participating in the research had become part of her healing journey.

Research participant 2 (RP2): a Catholic, Filipino, female, in her 50s (?)

At a church event, I noticed RP2 among Filipinos selling food and goods, playfully drawing on multiple linguistic resources with singing, dancing, eating, and laughing. This mirrored Jabar (2015), who described Filipino women in strengthening solidarity and developing the religious aspect of identity, and Balgoa (2017), who illuminated how people enhanced national identity by speaking Tagalog as a common language and sharing semiotic symbols. After six months of the "just being there approach," RP2 and I started to smile at each other; eventually, we shared contact information. We began meeting outside church, sometimes with her friends. Consequently, she volunteered to participate in the research.

RP2 is from Mindanao, located in the southern region of the archipelago in the Philippines. After her father lost his business, she supported her family by working as a contract dancer in Japan, also labeled a 'newcomer'. On her second tour, she met her husband; they married in 1992, settled in his hometown, and raised two children.

When I asked how she wanted to carry on our conversation, she said "both" (the Japanese

and English languages). Due to technical issues, only the verbal track was transcribed.

RQ1: How do intersectional features manifest and transform in participants' lived experiences?

Three "homes" emerged as subthemes: her home on Mindanao Island (106), her Catholic church as "my second home" (238–254), and her "home" in Japan. Across these subthemes, the locally established label "*gaijin*/外人" (literally, "outside-people") for "foreigners" was something she continually lived with, even as other identity markers shifted—her "name" (to the Japanese family name), her "visa" (to a "permanent residency"), and her "socioeconomic class" (to "a wife of a Japanese salary-man"). Indeed, this label was key to interpreting salient transforming intersecting features and life theme.

She first used the label "gaijin" in describing her first impression in Japan, "there's a lot of tension, for us because we're (…) gaijin (…)" (43). She continued, "In our promotion, though, we are taught basic Japanese languages" (47), "The dos and nots. Strict culture. Bunka <"culture" in Japanese>"(49), and expanded on "the nots" by saying, "Not using bad words. Especially bad words, we must keep our image, the men like our look, big eyes, body, kawaii <cute>, you know" (51). Hence, "gaijin" firmly intersected with "the Japanese languages/words" and "strict culture", and "look (appearance)", which sub-intersected with "big eyes", "body" and "being 'kawaii/cute'" in playing a highly feminized role. One day, she was falsely accused of having stolen a "customer's expensive watch" (61) and she was crying because "I could not express myself" (63). She uttered, "that was shocking, 'Oh, I don't want to be gaijin (…)" (67).

She also used "gaijin" in articulating the difficulties when she started her married life, "maybe Japanese, the culture. The language barrier. The people? Manners? Dealing with the in-laws (omission)" (208). But, she depicted how her mother-in-law helped her, "we cannot understand each other the language. We have sign language every time" (212), "She used to laugh at me, when I don't know what words I will use. It's OK and she used to smile" (214). She added, "I have lots of dictionaries and others my husband bought me in the bookstores. (omission) Yeah, he helped me a lot" (216), and "My brother-in-law too, my sister-in-law. They helped me a lot" (218). She also shared some experiences as a "gaijin mom" (238). She illustrated how other "Japanese" mothers ignored her when she greeted them, "And I always heard the word gaijin (244), "Yeah, it hurts. But it's true, I'm a gaijin" (246). And she added, "But whenever it happened I had my very kind neighbor, who used to protect me always, with smiles and words" (254). Here, "language" and "culture" appeared as collaborative means involving modal and semiotic resources, unlike the enforced "rules" she had followed as an entertainer to maintain her image. Indeed, she admitted that it was these reciprocal healing experiences that gradually let her rigid perceptions soften.

[8] The first formal interview was held online on 12/30/2020 (for approximately 90 minutes); the final interview, on 10/7/2022 (for 180 minutes)

Another consistent term put to the fore was "church" reflecting different roles: "a community to belong to, "to gain support from fathers and sisters", and a "safe place." There, she gained her sense of security and strength through participating in volunteer activities, which she described, "a way to thank God" (424 – 429). She utilized her linguistic skills (English, Tagalog, and her dialect, usually categorized as Chavacano) (290 – 300). This echoes Jabar (2015), who illustrates the sense of empowerment that the women gained through capitalizing their language resources. Just that in this case, "her dialect" meant more than a named dialect (this will be explored below). She further described the volunteering experiences by utilizing her own binaries, "low and high" and "new and "old" towards church members, "Yeah, low-level people, newcomers, people who received domestic violence" (342), "It's a big help, a strength for me too" (344). Thus, in her lived experiences, she is not merely someone described as "a minority" and "a newcomer" but 'a majority' and 'an old ('high') member' in church, who is experiencing a positive reciprocal power, given to the struggling people as well as to herself. This also supports intracategorical phenomena within one side of the binary framework, "non-Japanese/minority." Like RP1, she further articulated her transforming relationships unique to the pandemic situation, "survival resources", which included both the visible (food, water, masks, gloves, sanitary products, etc.) and the nonvisible (clean air, personal space, a stable Wi-fi) (346, 348).

RQ2: What roles do named languages and linguistic features play in expressing and interpreting one's lived experiences?

RP2 used a variety of other linguistic features beyond the named languages, Japanese and English. She enlightened me, "we have one hundred ten dialects in different islands. (omission)" (280), "I think I do that mixing every time. That's normal" (282) and "I find it a good thing" (284). Sometime after the interview, she exposed nuanced relationality between "religion" and "dialect", "YES i LOVE my dialect and it is engraved in my heart. And using it every day! We have a colorful culture in Mindanao because we have our Muslim brothers and sisters, mostly they are living in Mindanao!" (LINE, 2/28, 2021). Hence, RP2 had gone through the language(s) trajectories by relocation from one assemblage of sociolinguistic hierarchies in the Philippines to another in Japan; moreover, in her "lived" religion, the colorful religious features that have been historically sedimented (i.e., a transfusion between Islam and Christianity accumulated upon indigenous beliefs, Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism, cf. Miller J., 2023) are alive and enmeshed with other features in her repertoire, particularly with the associated linguistic features. Thus, to interpret her statement, "I've coped with my language problems and all" (363), I referred not merely to the named language "Japanese" that she was challenged to acquire in her new life, but to how she overcame discomfort at being unable to express herself to a comfortable state of embracing "lived translanguaging." She confirmed, "I can say happy and stronger now because I can communicate without fear and hesitation" (LINE, 2/28, 2021).

Importantly, there was a particular term that signified our rapport enrichment, *mamisie* (a contemporary word, combining English and Tagalog, meaning mammies and sisters), which was first used by RP2 online a couple of months after the first interview. She wrote, "I've my new "Sis ❤️ in CHRIST" and uploaded one of the photos collaged with a message saying, "Thanks *kambal*. Ang mga beautiful *mamsie*", which she later translated as "thanks twin sister, thank you beautiful mommies & sisters" (LINE, 2/2, 2021). I was able to interpret mamisie in her messages because I felt that she was freely expressing herself "without fear and hesitation" through her lived translanguaging.

Notwithstanding, as our rapport developed, we had conversations about our geopolitical history, including WWII. One day, she wrote to me as if she exposed her personal thoughts and determination:

> *You know, we're all human (omission) we cannot change and forget the history but to accept the hurtful reality with the Big Heart and never going back, but going forward for the GOOD of all! (LINE, 8/28, 2021)*

Moreover, she unveiled that her family members and close friends in Japan all belong to one specific Buddhist sect and wrote, "we respect each other's belief especially in religion!". Then she added that she is grateful for her family and friends, "who are willing to teach me their cultures and traditions and never judge my imperfection! (LINE, 8/28, 2021).

It is safe to say that instead of taking the sides of the binary, (ex-)colonizer or (ex-) colonized, RP2 and close ones found a way to share the historical past as human experience each needs to learn from. They deepened their respect for each other as they shared similar values in having (religious) beliefs in navigating their respective life. Such lived experiences laid the foundation (on top of RP2's nature) to be caring and kind to me.

RQ3: What is life theme(s)?

Based on the contextualized data, I initially interpreted her life theme as "Finding happiness inside, 'It's difficult but more happy'" because her expression in association with her third "home" (deriving from her narrative, "It's difficult but it's more happy. It's more, maybe I didn't work for almost 30 years since I got married" (361)) seemed to indicate her unceasing will to foster her 'family' including her friends. Nevertheless, when I shared this interpretation, she responded quickly: "God is always in the center" (F2), and added, "that's why I'm happy. It's with me, my religion, guiding me. Maybe" (F10).

Later in the interview, we began tracing back to how our rapport developed. She seemed unsure of how to reply and said, "Yeah. We cannot explain, but it's so easy to communicate with you because maybe (…), feelings? Like NOW? We're just *mamisies"* (F30). I nodded. Sadly, she divulged that the category "gaijin" still persists in the Filipino members' life. She was hesitant to reveal details of the discrimination, but I could feel that she was part of the collective sadness, and concluded with a note for my benefit, "It's okay" (F113). I noted, "my heart saddened; these resonant aches should be told" (Fieldnotes, 10/7, 2022).

Since no theme revision arose during the final interview, I reflected on our last interview and revised the life theme by adding "God" element, "Nurturing life in Japan, 'it's difficult but more happy'; God is always in me." I shared it with her by LINE and she replied, "I love it." When I saw her at the church, she told me the reason, "I love it because three "homes" were inseparable, all in my heart." She told me she valued the words—the revised life theme—because, "it's ours" (Fieldnotes, 10/15, 2022).

Discussion

Although small in scale, the previous section demonstrated the methodological potential of a critical phenomenological approach that integrates researcher self-reflexivity and intersubjective confirmation. As rapport developed, interpretation deepened through an ongoing process of contextualization, reflecting on data (parts) as integral to the research

(whole) and energizing a hermeneutic circle.

This inductive, non-additive approach to intersectionality captured both oppressive and healing dynamics, revealing nuances that remain obscured in analyses constrained by predetermined categories. The subheadings that initially framed participants (RP1 and RP2) by identity categories gradually dissolved, allowing their experiences to be reconstituted within a broader relational frame attentive to ecological sensibility and digitally mediated forms of connection. Both participants utilized and created their own categories and labels as shifting reference points in articulating transformations in perception. They developed contextualized dualities that emphasized reciprocity between poles, and both explicitly witnessed and felt changes in relationality during the pandemic period.

For instance, RP1 did not foreground categories such as nationality or race, but instead articulated experiences of overwhelming power through a series of "crises" describing mental, emotional, and physical deterioration. She underscored references to ecological power (nature/ecosphere), womanhood (gender), and the digitally mediated online space. In navigating these crises, she articulated a relational duality between "the lower/inner, spiritual, and sensual world" and "the upper/external, manifested world," while foregrounding God (religion). Together, these dimensions generated healing resources that enabled her to regain equilibrium, with sensory, modal, and semiotic features playing an indispensable role. During the pandemic, she observed reduced trash on beaches and described a sense of serenity in the air, transforming fear of global warming into awe toward the resilience of nature. She also came to recognize the materially consequential yet invisible resource of Wi-Fi connectivity as enabling sustained relationships with clients, marking a shift in perception from threat to connection.

Similarly, RP2 organized her experiences around relational anchors. She described three "homes" and multiple roles of the church, with the label *gaijin* ("outsider") remaining central across changing circumstances. This label intersected with other categories such as nationality (Japanese), language (Japanese), womanhood (gender), racialized appearance (e.g., eyes and body), and cultural expectations (e.g., *kawaii* and *Bunka* norms). Over time, she described healing experiences shared with family members and friends through which rigid perceptions softened and new emotional, modal, and semiotic features emerged. In narrating her role within the church, she introduced her own binaries—"low and high" and "new and old"—to describe empowerment grounded in reciprocal care. She also emphasized relationships formed during the pandemic through "survival resources," encompassing both visible materials (e.g., masks) and nonvisible conditions (e.g., air, personal space, Wi-Fi connectivity).

Concerning persistent dualisms in identity research, the present analytical frame illuminated significant dynamics. Both participants experienced being positioned on "the other side" of the majority/minority binary. RP1, typically classified as Japanese/majority, experienced marginalization as an "outsider (not local)," while RP2, typically positioned as non-Japanese/minority, understood herself as a majority and an "old (high)" member within the church community. These experiences highlight not only intracategorical dynamics but also the human tendency to exclude through labeling practices.

With regard to the monolingual/multilingual binary, the findings point to intersectional entanglements that exceed additive understandings of language and religion. Healing experiences sustained and energized the participants' life themes—not as static or dogmatic moral frameworks, but as resilient moral pursuits enacted through ongoing communication with

self and others—a phenomenon interpreted here as lived religion. In the pursuits, compassion was extended to those who practiced or believed differently. RP1 described her conversion from Buddhism to Catholicism as an "installation in my soul," while RP2 articulated religion as deeply historical and affective, repeatedly referring to it as "my religion." These accounts suggest that religion functioned less as a categorical identity marker and more as an ethical orientation embedded in everyday life.

Language likewise emerged as a vital site of embodied meaning—Leib— intertwined with lived religion. Both participants expressed through linguistic, modal, and semiotic features imbued with sensual and emotional residues—lived translanguaging. RP1 reflected on how labu(love) infused meaning-making between inner and outer spheres, likening expression to "playing a harp." RP2 emphasized the inseparability of religion and language through expressions such as "engraved in my heart." These narratives complicate the label "monolingual" in RP1's case and exceed additive understandings of "multilinguals" in RP2's case, inviting reconsideration of studies that take "multilinguals" for granted as research targets.

Finally, it is important to emphasize that these interpretations emerged through sustained rapport with each participant. Through this process, the researcher also became aware of resonant religious and linguistic features, as documented in fieldnotes. On this relational basis, both participants articulated reflections that moved beyond the interpersonal "you and me" toward broader orientations. RP1 described reciprocal human existence within a planetary constellation and referred to the research relationship as *Jigen wo koete* ("beyond dimensions"), while RP2 used *mamisie* to crystallize relational solidarity and called for collective efforts oriented toward shared humanity. Although the revised life themes resemble their initial formulations, their significance lies less in the wording itself than in the shared sense of meaning and affirmation they came to represent. These findings underscore rapport-building and researcher self-reflexivity not merely as methodological tools, but as relational practices that deepen what becomes interpretable as lived meaning over time, suggesting one avenue for expanding the interpretive paradigm in applied linguistics.

Conclusion: Towards Shared Hope

This paper does not seek to critique individual scholars or religious traditions. Rather, it critically examines methodological tendencies in identity research that prioritize categorical positioning over lived experience. By introducing the concept of a "constituting self," the study has asked what "essence" might emerge as "life themes" amid fluid, shifting identities as people navigate life in Japan. Using a critical phenomenological approach as a "prism," categories, labels, and binaries were treated not as explanatory endpoints but as interpretive reference points, allowing participants' lived realities to come into view through "lived translanguaging" and "lived religion."

The analysis showed how participants navigated both oppressive and healing forces through embodied orientations toward language and religion within constellations of relationality that sometimes extended beyond human-to-human relationships. Religion functioned less as a fixed identity category than as a moral and affective orientation embedded in everyday life, while language emerged as a site of embodied meaning entwined with sensory, emotional, and relational experience. The findings also highlight the importance of attending to material and relational conditions that shape lived experience, including participants' ecological sensibility and their reframing of online connectivity during the pandemic. As rapport deepened through a reciprocal healing process, participants articulated movements from the interpersonal

"you and me" toward broader orientations to humanity and, at times, to living beings on the planet more generally. While such moments do not warrant expansive generalization, they underscore the analytic value of tracing how ethical orientation can nourish through more-than-human relationality over time. This also indicates the potential value of identity formation research within a post-Anthropocene framework (cf. Ferrando, 2023). These insights complicate additive approaches to intersectionality, indicating how continuity and coherence may be experienced even as social positionings shift; in this sense, identity formation appears as an ongoing ethical becoming, sustained through ongoing meaning-making.

Looking ahead, identity formation research in applied linguistics and related human sciences may benefit from accumulating longitudinal, relationally attuned accounts that illuminate how individuals sustain meaning, connection, and ethical orientation under conditions of heightened uncertainty. Such work may clarify whether, and how, resonances emerge across diverse life trajectories—not as pre-fixed explanatory frames, but as recognizably similar ways of navigating difficult times. "Shared hope," then, marks a possibility that comes into view through careful attention to lived experience and the relational meaning-making through which such resonances remain available amid shifting constellations of relation.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to the reviewers for their valuable comments, which helped improve this article, and to the editors of the journal for their consistent support in publishing it.

References

Baker, C. (2001). *Foundations of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*. Bristol. Multilingual Matters.

Balgoa, N. (2017). The Filipino migrants in Japan: Reconstructing identity and nation. *Langkit Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities, 7*(1), 95-117.

Balgoa, N. (2024). From housewives to ALTs: the reconfiguration of identity of Filipino women migrants in Japan. In Hiratsuka, T. (ed). *Team teachers in Japan: beliefs, identities and emotions*, 55-66. Routledge.

Blackledge, A., & Creese, A. (2017). Translanguaging and the body. *International Journal of Multilingualism, 14*(3), 250-268.

Block, D., & Corona, V. (2014). Exploring class-based intersectionality. *Language, Culture and Curriculum, 27*(1), 27-42.

Čapek, J., & Loidolt, S. (2021). Phenomenological approaches to personal identity. *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences, 20*(2), 217-234.

Crenshaw, K. W. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1989(1), 139-167.

Darvin, R., & Norton, B. (2021). Investment and motivation in language learning: What's

the difference? *Language Teaching*, 1-12. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444821000174

Docot, M. L. B. (2009). On identity and development: Filipino women entertainers in transition in Japan. In D. Nault (Ed.), *Development in Asia: Interdisciplinary, post-neoliberal, and transnational perspectives* (pp. 107–134). Brown Walker Press.

Ferrando, R. (2023). *The Art of Being Posthuman: Who Are We in the 21st Century?* Polity.

Finlay, L. (2009). Embracing researcher subjectivity in phenomenological research: A response to Ann Scott. *European Journal for Qualitative Research in Psychotherapy*, 4, 13-19.

García, O., & Li, W. (2014). *Translanguaging: Language, Bilingualism and Education*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Glick Schiller, N. (2012). Situating identities: Towards an identities studies without binaries of difference. Identities. *Global Studies in Culture and Power, 19*(4), 520-532.

Gottlieb, N. (2005). *Language and Society in Japan*. Cambridge University Press.

Guarné, B., & Yamashita, S. (2015). Introduction: Japan in global circulation: Transnational migration and multicultural politics. *Bulletin of the National Museum of Ethnology, 40*(1), 53-69.

Holliday, A., & MacDonald, M. (2020). Researching the intercultural: Intersubjectivity and the problem with postpositivism. *Applied Linguistics, 41*(5), 621-639.

Hori, Y. (2021). Investigating an invisible bilingual/*kikokushijo* from translanguaging perspectives. *JAAL in JACET Proceedings*, 4, 8-15.

Hori, Y. (2025). *Radical Hope for All: Human Identity Formation Research*. KDP. https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0FNL59C6Z

Hori, Y., Sugihara, Y., & Li, W. (2024). Liquid crystals: A phenomenological approach to complexity of university students' identity formation through translanguaging perspective. *Applied Linguistics*, 2024, 1-15. https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/amae005

Husserl, E. (1970). *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* (D. Carr, Trans.). Northwestern University Press. (Original work published 1935)

Iwabuchi, K. (2021). Dialoguing with diversity: Towards an inclusive and egalitarian society. *DIVE-IN – An International Journal on Diversity and Inclusion, 1*(1), 18-28.

Jabar, M. A. (2015). Religious experiences of Filipino Catholic women migrants in Japan: The case of the Kaagapay Oita Filipino Association. *Asia-Pacific Social Science Review, 15*(1), 135-140.

Levon, E. (2015). Integrating intersectionality in language, gender, and sexuality research. *Language and Linguistics Compass, 9*(7), 295-308.

Li, W. (2011). Moment analysis and translanguaging space: Discursive construction of identities by multilingual Chinese youth in Britain. *Journal of Pragmatics, 43*(5), 1222-1235.

Li, W. (2022). Translanguaging as method. Research Methods. *Applied Linguistics*, 1, 100026. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rmal.2022.100026

McCarthy, J., & Wright, P. (2004). *Technology as Experience*. Cambridge, MIT Press.

McCall, L. (2005). The complexity of intersectionality. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society, 30*(3), 1771-1800.

Miller, J. (2023). *Religion in the Philippines. Asia Society; Navigating Shared Future*. https://asiasociety.org/education/religion-philippines

Morgan, B. (2007). Poststructuralism and applied linguistics. In J. Cummins & C. Davison (Eds.), *International Handbook of English Language Teaching* (pp. 1033-1052). Springer.

Nakane, I., Otsuji, E., & Armour, W. S. (Eds.). (2015). *Languages and Identities in a Transitional Japan: From Internationalization to Globalization.* Routledge.

Nishi, K. (2011). Essential insight as a method of understanding our internal life. *The Journal of Tokyo Medical University, 69*(1), 15-21.

Pennycook, A. (2021). *Critical Applied Linguistics: A Critical Re-Introduction*. Routledge.

Sato, E., & Fujita**,** Y. (2025). Tracking language learners' motivations within translanguaging perspective. *Translation and Translanguaging in Multilingual Contexts*, *11*(2), 171-199. https://doi.org/10.1075/ttmc.00161.sat

Shimoji, L. Y., & Ishihara, M. (2022). *Intaa-seushonariti na "noisu" wo narasutameni.* (Revealing intersectional "noises"). *Gendaishisou*.

Smith, J. A., Flowers, P., & Larkin, M. (2009). *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: Theory, Method and Research*. Sage.

Souza, A. (2016). Linguistic and religious identities. In S. Preece (Ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Language and Identity* (pp. 195-209). Routledge.

Steinmetz, K. (2020, February 20). She coined the term 'intersectionality' over 30 years ago. Here's what it means to her today. Time. https://time.com/5786710/kimberle-crenshaw-intersectionality/

Van den Eynden, V., Corti, L., Woollard, M., Bishop, L., & Horton, L. (2011). *Managing and sharing data: Best practice for researchers*. UK Data Archive, University of Essex.

Vertovec, S. (2007). Super-diversity and its implications. *Ethnic and Racial Studies, 30*(6), 1024-1054.

Williams, C. (1994). *Arfarniad o dulliau dysgu ac addysgu yng ng hyd-destun addysg uwchradd ddwyieithog* [An evaluation of teaching and learning methods in the context of bilingual secondary education]. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Wales.

Yoshie, A. (1994). *Shinbutsu-shuugou* (Shinto-Buddhism syncretism). Iwanami Shinsho.

Zhu, H., & Li, W. (2016). Transnational experience, aspiration, and family language policy. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development, 37*(7), 655-666.