

If you met me for the first time, which language would you speak to me? German? Swahili? Many choose to speak English. That's what one convenience store cashier did when I was in Tokyo for my school trip. When he saw me, he assumed I could not speak Japanese. I like English, and my friends were watching me. So, I tried to look cool, and replied to him in English. Between you and me, it didn't go too well. If I have time, I can give a speech in English. However, when I had to come up with something on the spot, I might as well have been trying to speak Arabic.

Though, you would be right in assuming one of my parents is not Japanese. My father is Swedish. His native language is Swedish, not English. When I was young I would spend summers in Sweden with my family there. I can remember understanding Swedish. I remember communicating with my friends, and fetching things for my grandmother.

However, while my family has always accepted me, to many Swedish people, I don't look Swedish. I look Asian—specifically Chinese. In Sweden, all Asians are basically Chinese. They cannot see any differences between our faces or our cultures. They were also certain I knew kung fu.

Just as in Sweden, my appearance has caused many people in Japan to see me as different. Ever since I have been in school I have been bullied because I don't look like everyone else. My classmates have jeered at me to speak English and write English, because they assume all non-Asians speak English. However, despite how I might appear, Japanese is my only native language.

Remember my Swedish father? He speaks excellent Japanese, and it is the only language we speak together. So, while I remember being able to speak Swedish when I was younger, I lost what Swedish I could speak when I entered school, and my environment became all Japanese. The last time I went to Sweden, I couldn't communicate with any of my family members. I am basically like every junior high school boy who has spent his entire life here in Japan.

Except for one point; everyone calls me “ハーフ”. ハーフ is from the English word “half”. You know what it means? It means incomplete; 50 out of 100. That's not a fun label, and to be frank, it doesn't make much sense. Imagine an ethnically Japanese couple who raises their family for several years in a foreign country. Imagine they then come back to Japan. How would you see their kids? Are they more Japanese than I am?

There are about 580,000 biracial people in Japan today, and the number is growing. It is time we expanded the definition of what it means to be Japanese. It is the 21st century, and the world is only getting smaller. We have to understand that Japanese blood is only part of being Japanese. Being Japanese means being a member of a group of people with a unique cultural heritage. And that means, I'm Japanese too.

Believe it or not, I grew up in Aomori prefecture; in Hirosaki city. In the summer, I walk to the beat of Neputa drums. I spend winter mornings shoveling lots of snow with my father. I am not half anything. I am one whole person. I am a member of this community. I am a citizen of this country. I am speaking to you today to ask you to rethink how you define multiracial people. Please hear my message; and together, we can build a stronger and more inclusive Japan.