

Figures of personhood  
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*Abstract*

*Figures of personhood* refers to socially recognizable personae that can be performed through semiotic enactment (Agha 2007, 2011). Such figures become important for linguistic differentiation, which is rarely based on the indexicality of individual features of a variety alone, but also on the social meaning constructed through the speaker-types that we commonly associate with the variety. Figures of personhood come to be linked with language varieties when sets of linguistic features recur with particular social, behavioral, and characterological traits in interactional context; it is such recurrent juxtapositions of speaker models with linguistic forms that make us recognize those forms as constituting a linguistic variety with particular social meaning. In this sense, the notion of figures of personhood highlights the socially and interactionally grounded nature of linguistic differentiation, as well as the multiple and constantly shifting social meanings of linguistic varieties. It also underlines how the distinctions we make between varieties are frequently embodied evaluations, as they are rooted in specific images of speakerhood that we ourselves experience and live out in everyday life.

In this presentation, I show how this idea can contribute to debates in applied linguistics regarding hierarchical notions of speaker categories and language varieties, including “native speaker”, “language learner”, and “standard English”. Through a discussion of how figures of personhood are embedded in discourses about English in South Korea, I illustrate how widely circulating images of speaker types and their language use play an important role in constructing distinctions such as native vs. non-native speaker, successful vs. unsuccessful language learner, “good” English vs. “bad” English, etc. I show that such distinctions are neither determined by objectively identifiable sets of criteria nor produced as simple reflection of dominant ideologies, but constantly reproduced and negotiated through figures of personhood that are recurrently invoked across multiple sites of metalinguistic discourse.

The idea I will talk about is that of *figures of personhood*, and it’s an idea closely related to the concepts that we just talked about, such as the listening subject, and enregisterment. So I hope my presentation can build upon those earlier presentations.

*Figures of personhood* refers to socially recognizable personae that can be performed through semiotic enactment (Agha 2007, 2011). When we say a particular linguistic form marks its speaker as belonging to a particular social type—such as male vs. female, lower class vs. upper class, native speaker vs. non-native speaker, etc—we are making reference to the figures of personhood that are enacted by that particular form. But these figures can be more specific than the broad social categories such as gender or social class, as I will show later. The idea can be traced back to the notion of *figure* as it appears in the work of Erving Goffman (1981), and further back to Mikhail Bakhtin’s concepts of *voice* and *chronotope* (1981, 1984). In any case, the notion of figures of personhood refers to the images of person types that are recognizably tied to a semiotic register. Figures of personhood is important for our understanding of linguistic difference, not just because it encapsulates the indexical value of a linguistic variety, but also because it plays a crucial role in the emergence of speech registers.

We never experience linguistic difference as an abstract difference. Linguistic differentiation always takes place in an interactional context, where linguistic form is linked with particular speaker roles and social positions. When sets of linguistic features recur with particular social, behavioral, and characterological traits in interactional context, figures of personhood come to be linked with language varieties. It is such recurrent juxtapositions of speaker models with linguistic forms that make us recognize those forms as constituting a linguistic variety with particular social meaning.

One example of this is Asif Agha’s discussion of the enregisterment of received pronunciation, or RP, as a standard of English pronunciation. RP developed from a prestigious but regionally limited sociolect of southeastern England. It wasn’t until the 19th century that it came to be recognized as a supralocal, national standard. According to Agha, this shift in value was made possible in large part by 19th century metalinguistic texts, such as etiquette manuals, pronunciation guides, and novels in popular periodicals, which juxtaposed the linguistic variety with codified norms of proper and refined demeanor as expressed through specific behavioral and characterological traits. Talking about pronunciation in such texts always had to refer to specific person types and social roles, and for this reason, specific habits of dressing, grooming, gesture, gait, and taste came to be recognized as going together with a specific way of speaking, forming expectations about the behavior of people belonging to different social classes. In other words, the status of RP as a standard did not emerge because of some external condition alone, such as the adoption of the pronunciation in public education, but through widely circulated figures of personhood that came to be associated with this particular style of speaking.

Recognizing the role of figures of personhood in enregisterment can be very important for applied linguistics, because it can help us better understand how hierarchical notions of speaker categories and language varieties, including “native speaker”, “language learner”, and “standard English”, get reproduced. Applied linguistics has been contesting and problematizing these ideas for decades, pointing out how these categories are ideologically loaded and discursively constructed, rather than reflecting any objectively identifiable entity definable by empirical criteria (Rampton 1990, Norton 1997, Leung,

Harris, and Rampton 1997, Brutt-Griffler and Samimy 2001, Widdowson 1994, Wee 2002, Bhatt 2002, Holliday 2005). Nonetheless, such concepts persist, and remain powerful conditions for language policy, educational practice, and the way we view and interact with different speakers around the world. A focus on the role of figures of personhood can help us understand the nature of these categories, by showing the processes through which they come to be reproduced.

To illustrate this, I want to talk about one particular figure of personhood that plays a prominent role in Korean discourses about English. And that is the figure of the Korean as incompetent speaker of English. In Korea, we frequently encounter metalinguistic comments on how Koreans are bad speakers of English. That is, Koreans are typically depicted as lacking the competence to use English in a meaningful way, despite receiving many years of formal instruction in English. Elsewhere, I referred to this ideology as self-deprecation. But it is important to note that this is not just an abstract ideology, but is often manifest in metalinguistic discourse through the mediation of figures of personhood. The image here is that of a speaker who freezes with anxiety when he or she is faced with the need to speak English, completely unable to carry on a meaningful conversation in English, and feeling dreadfully embarrassed. Such image of the Korean speaker of English repeatedly occurs in many forms of metalinguistic discourse, including jokes about English, news reports, language policy debates, as well as face-to-face conversation.

I just have time to show you one example of this, which comes from a popular Korean webcomic called *Maeumui Soli*. The first panel shows a shop, probably a café, where people are sitting around chatting on happily, until a white foreigner with blonde hair enters to ask directions in English, by saying “excuse me...”. The second panel shows that, as soon as this happens, everyone suddenly puts on a somber and serious face, in order to prevent the foreigner from approaching them. The woman who just happens to stand right before the foreigner, quickly turns her body to run away. The image conveyed here, then, is that Koreans are highly fearful of speaking English, and that they will avoid speaking it at all costs.

This motif of foreigners asking for directions is actually quite commonly used as a way of talking about Koreans’ incompetence in English and the anxiety they feel about English. For instance, there are many jokes about English involving a foreigner approaching a Korean on the street asking for directions, which always make fun of the Korean’s anxiety and inability to properly respond. The prevalence of this image can be illustrated by the fact that it even gets used as a justification of language policy. In 2003, Lee Myung-Bak, who was the mayor of Seoul at that time, suggested making English an official language for the Seoul Metropolitan Government. In explaining the reason for this policy, he said: “More importance should be given to English education ... I want to make a society where at least people can explain simple directions in English when they encounter foreigners on the street.”

So we might identify this image of the incompetent Korean as a figure of personhood, as it links particular behavioral and affective traits and positions with a specific linguistic

behavior. We might call it a stereotype, except that it does more than just associate a typified behavior to a social group. The Korean character is not only constructed as incompetent in English, but also assigned a specific subject position—that is, the Korean is presented as highly nervous and embarrassed about his or her own English. The Korean is also placed in a particular social position in relation to the English-speaking foreigner—for example, the foreigner is racialized and most commonly represented as white, and the validity and appropriateness of the foreigner’s act of asking for directions in English is never questioned. In other words, the Korean figure of personhood inserts English into a chronotopic space of personal traits, roles, subjectivities, and positionalities to situate it in a more complex social context. And this creates the effect of further naturalizing the distinctions that are generated through such semiotic work.

We can think of this by looking at another example. This example involves one news report regarding a recent trend of adopting English as a medium of instruction for Korean universities. Recent competition among Korean universities have led many schools to adopt English as a medium of instruction, both as a strategy of boosting their graduates’ competence in English and as a way of boosting the university’s status as ‘global university’ in national-level ranking exercises. Such moves have received much criticism for various reasons, for instance for its neoliberal motives and the possible threat it brings to Korean identity. But one of the most visible and pervasive critiques invokes the image of Koreans as bad speakers that we have been talking about. That is, it is argued that English as a medium of instruction simply doesn’t work, because the instructors and students lack the competence in English to make it work in the first place. The following example, taken from one media report, illustrates this:

A Korea University student who says (he/she) is more comfortable in English because (he/she) lived in an English-speaking country for a long time before entering university said, “there are many lectures that are in very bad English; there are also many instructors who just read the lecture notes they prepared,” and that “I saw students from abroad who were just flabbergasted.” (Kim Dohyeong, *The Asia Economy Daily*, 2010.03.26)

Here, we see the depiction of Korean instructors who only have command of “very bad English” (literally, “English that is not English”), and who do not have the competence to speak spontaneously during the lecture and simply read from prepared texts. In this case, the figure of the incompetent Korean is merged with the role of university instructors, and recycled into debates about the place of English in Korean universities.

The example does not simply illustrate another uptake of this figure of the incompetent Korean, however. The example consists of multiple layering of Bakhtinian voices in the form of multiple levels of reported speech—which, for our purposes, can be understood as multiple contrasting figures of personhood. The report builds upon a negative assessment of English lectures made by a Korean student who has “lived in an English-speaking country for a long time” and for that reason is “more comfortable in English”. The student, in turn, reports on the reactions of “students from abroad”, i.e., non-Korean students, who are “flabbergasted”, or dismayed, to find lectures being offered in such bad

English. The role of these figures is obvious; they are introduced as figures of authority, speakers who have good competence in English, who can testify to really how bad is the instructor's English. That is, they are figures that with authority, which neither the author, the journalist, nor the readers, as "ordinary Koreans", are not supposed to have.

The juxtaposition of these multiple figures of personhood, then, has several effects. First, the figure of the incompetent Korean is made more natural, as it is supported by the negative assessments made by these authoritative figures, who can truly tell what is good English and what is not. Second, the readers themselves come to be identified with the figure of incompetent Korean, because they are positioned as people who are unable to tell good English from bad English unless they are informed by those authoritative figures. In this way, the text functions not simply as a report of what goes on in the English-medium lecture hall—it also invokes dimensions of subjectivity, instructing the reader to accept distinctions between good and bad speakers of English as natural, to humbly defer to the authority of the native speaker, and to think of their own English as not simply "different" but embarrassing.

This demonstrates how figures of personhood, by being inserted into metalinguistic discourse and circulated throughout society, may work to reproduce and reify contrasts in the meaning of register varieties and the speakers associated with them. Figures of personhood are powerful semiotic nodes in the process of enregisterment, which insert language varieties into an interconnected chain of social relations and subject positions. When varieties are linked with vivid images of character types, those varieties come to be connected with indexicals of subjectivity, which represent more than abstract contrasts in social value, but embodied meanings such as anxiety, ownership, and deference. As the Korean case shows, figures of personhood can help us understand why contrasts such as native speaker vs. non-native speaker or good vs. bad English are not just simple reflections of dominant ideologies, but differences that come to be deeply rooted in dimensions of subjectivity, and which for that reason, feels truly natural and justified. Tracing figures of personhood through metalinguistic discourse can therefore be a powerful resource for applied linguistics, which needs to question the nature of the linguistic and social categories that we use to make sense of linguistic practice.