

Images of multilingualism in the South Korean popular media

Adrienne Lo

Assistant Professor, Department of Anthropology
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

This presentation examines ideologies of language and citizenship in the South Korean popular media. Historically, multilingual competency has been treated with suspicion in South Korea, as an emblem of Korea's subjugation and the weak status of the nation. Multilingualism was seen as necessary, and yet also as corrupting to the integrity and purity of the Korean language. In recent years, however, this ideology of one nation-one people-one language has been accompanied by one which frames multilingualism as modern, desirable, and as a marker of global citizenship (Park 2009).

We examine how these ideologies of multilingualism are understood through images of people, or linguistic personas (Agha 2007). We trace a shift in popular media portrayals of multilingualism. In earlier depictions, the parochial South Korean who was linguistically incompetent in English was contrasted against the worldly US-oriented *kyopho* 'overseas Korean' whose proficiency in English became an icon of their modernity and cosmopolitanism. In contemporary South Korean television serials, websites, comedy skits, movies, and newspaper articles, these two figures are joined by two new ones: 1) the elite transnational South Korean returnee (*saldaon saram*) who is depicted as speaking several languages well and 2) the inauthentic Korean American whose Korean and English are both laughably bad. The category of heritage language speaker is thus forged transnationally in relation to other kinds of multilinguals. We argue that these understandings of who is linguistically competent and who is linguistically incompetent often bear little relationship to actual levels of competency, as highly competent speakers can get framed as incompetent and vice versa. Competency is also mediated through ideologies of gender when women's proficiency in English is associated with moral decay. By tracing the ways that portrayals of language competency are linked to ideas about who truly belongs to the Korean nation, we highlight the role of the media in shaping our images of multilingual speakers.

Adrienne Lo is Assistant Professor in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. She is the co-editor of a forthcoming edited volume on South Korean educational migration and a special issue of the Journal of Sociolinguistics (2012) on globalization, multilingualism and identity in transnational South Korea. She is also the co-editor of Beyond Yellow English: Toward a Linguistic Anthropology of Asian Pacific America (OUP, 2009). She is currently working on a book manuscript about racialization, citizenship, and heritage language learning in a Korean American community in California.