

Korean Discourse and Identity: Lessons from Heritage Language Research

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Many studies in heritage language research have demonstrated the strong link between heritage language and ethnic identity (Cho 2000, Phinney et al. 2001, Tse 2000). Studies show that speakers with greater proficiency in a heritage language tend to have a stronger sense of ethnic identity (Phinney, Romero, Nava, & Huang 2001, Tse, 1997). But other studies report a lack of correlation between ethnic identity and heritage language proficiency (Mah 2005, Smolicz 1992, Jo 2001, Brown 2009), or that higher proficiency is linked instead to bicultural identities (Lee 2002), suggesting that fluency in a heritage language cannot always predict stronger ethnic identity ties. These diverse findings are perhaps not surprising to the social constructionist who views identity as discursively constructed rather than an innate property of a person or group. Research on social interaction has produced insights into how identities may be taken on, rejected, co-opted or challenged (see Bucholtz and Hall 2004). A heritage language, therefore, must entail more than where a speaker grew up or what languages were spoken there. And its relationship to identity must be considered as a complex achievement, one that is displayed (or not displayed) in one's social interactions and as part of one's social repertoire.

To pursue this line of heritage language research, I approach the study of identity through language ideologies, or what Silverstein (1979: 173) defines as 'sets of beliefs about language articulated by users as a rationalization or justification of perceived structure and use'. Ideologies about language are pervasive in language learning contexts, and serve to mediate between heritage language and ethnic identity. The ideology linking proficiency in heritage language to a strong sense of ethnic identity in the studies cited above represents only one of many possible important ideologies influencing heritage language learning. In this talk, I focus on recent research in Korean as a heritage language from a social perspective. In particular, I will discuss specific ideologies reported in the study of Korean as a heritage language and show how a discourse analytic approach can articulate this complex relationship with some examples from my own research on Korean Americans as well as current research on language ideologies.

In the last decade, there has been increased awareness that second language learners and heritage language learners may bring distinct knowledge and experience to the language classroom. The field of heritage language learning has focused on who these learners are and how they may differ from other L2 learners. I suggest that a better understanding of these differences will entail attention to the social contexts of heritage language learning and the role of ideologies in the mediation of the relationships between heritage language and ethnic identity. I will conclude the talk with what I see as promising directions in heritage language research and how this research may continue the dynamic dialogue between the heritage language/language acquisition fields and the interdisciplinary field of discourse analysis.