



What Does It Mean to be a Language Variationist and Bilingual?

By Jeehye Park

jpark91@student.gsu.edu

Department of Middle and Secondary Education
College of Education and Human Development
Georgia State University, Atlanta, Georgia

In this article, the writer discusses what it means to be bilingual and a language variationist by reflecting on her language learning experiences. The author shows how she gains power through her multilayered identities as she learns to employ a variety of Englishes as tools for academic success and community participation.

Keywords: language variationist, bilingual, power, identity, standardized English

As a non-native English speaker, my first language learning experiences began with learning how to speak and write Korean. Our family uses standardized Korean, which is spoken through mass media. As Foulkes, Docherty, and Watt (1999) emphasize that early input is essential, my Korean has developed since an early age through the language input of my family members. The way of speaking, such as accents, frequently used words, and even gestures resemble the language of my parents (Roberts, 2013). It seems that I developed my language skills

according to Labov's (1990) hypothesis on child-directed speech, which says that young children echo their mother's speech. My mother, as the principal caregiver, provided the most influential input that supported my language acquisition at an early age. My family members do not speak the Korean dialect, which has unique accents, intonations, and word choices based on local language variations throughout South Korea. However, when family members on my father's side gather, they suddenly begin to speak the Korean dialect of the island located in Northern West side of South Korea. As an adult, I selectively and intentionally choose not to speak my father's dialect because Seoul, which is the place where I live, as the main city of South Korea, privileges standardized Korean, and I am proudly a member of that community (Meyerhoff & Strycharz, 2013).

During school days, learning was focused on standardized tests. English teachers taught mostly reading comprehension, vocabulary, and grammar, and there was a little bit of listening practice. Students learned English to get into prestigious colleges for their future rather than studying English as a lingua franca, and I was one of them. English class was teacher centered and students rarely had opportunities to speak during the class. In high school, English listening comprehension became emphasized and was included in the college entrance exam. We listened to a tape with native speakers' recordings. The conversations

consisted of daily conversations with friends or families. In one of the listening tests, I was confused by the strange and unfamiliar British accents of a native speaker, and I couldn't understand what the speaker was saying, which made me embarrassed. Right after the test, all the students complained about the native speaker's different accents and pronunciation to the English teacher and asked to replace the British speaker with an American English speaker. We all felt that only American English was the correct and recognized worldwide standard language, and we could not accept Englishes from other countries.

Later, I had a chance to change my views about learning English through a trip to the Philippines. People from the Philippines did not look embarrassed at all when they used strange pronunciations or incorrect grammar. They seemed to use very simple sentences and sometimes Tagalog mixed with English, and nobody cared about it because we could communicate and understand each other. The Filipinos seemed to employ either a heritage dialect or a "mixed" variety as described in Fought's linguistic repertoires (2013, p. 389). My understanding was that people only spoke a standardized English, which was American English as employed in the classroom. When I tried to make concrete sentences without grammatical errors in my brain, I could not communicate with people. I was already off the topic of that group when I was finally ready to speak

an English sentence. In this setting, it did not matter to me whether accent or pronunciation of English were similar to American English; rather, all I wanted was to be able to communicate with people in English.

I initially came to the U.S. as a graduate student. I remember that I had to face many challenges in terms of building my academic identity through English as a second language in an unfamiliar place, Knoxville, Tennessee. According to Johnstone (2004), place is essential to construct identity. For example, Spanish-dominant speakers showed that adopting local language forms such as “y’all” and “fixin” helped them to be in the community and to gain “local identity” (Wolfram, Carter, & Moriello, 2004, p. 344-345). Similarly, I tried to learn academic uses of standardized English in order to be a member of the graduate school community. At the same time, I picked up several expressions of colloquial English with southern accents because I was sure that this would be the effective way to be close to my classmates.

Since success in graduate study relies on heavy reading, writing, and discussing, I had to adapt to new strategies associated with how to express my points of view, support ideas, and discuss arguments in standardized English. I had to struggle in order to equip myself with an aggressive attitude to express my ideas in writing and class discussion. I sometimes found myself mimicking

Tennessee's Southern accents when talking with classmates. I knew that my pronunciation couldn't be the same as theirs but I guess that I wanted to be a part of the community rather than being an outsider. I memorized some expressions to use later when I was in a similar situation where the conversation happened. Finally, I selectively chose a variety of English that depended on the context and the type of discourse being used. For example, I speak in different ways when I am in classroom and in local markets.

When I teach English to Korean students and English language learners (ELLs) from other countries, I often feel that my perspectives and experiences about learning English are reflected in my teaching. For example, I respect ELLs' diversity in language and culture. I encourage them to be proud of different cultural perspectives and ideas, and a variety of ways of speaking English with different accents and pronunciations. They also need enough time to be ready to share ideas and to speak in front of classes. I especially feel empathy towards English learners who will go through learning processes in English only classes in the U.S. public school system. The learners might be confused when they realize that there are a variety of Englishes depending on the context such as school or community. The learners would be overwhelmed by the fact that their way of speaking English is not welcomed by teachers and other native speakers.

According to Gee (2013), people acquire “new social languages and genres” resulting in constructing different “Discourses”, in other words “identity kits” (p. 143-144). ELLs have already built identities in their culture and language, and they are required to build new identities again in a new language, English (Kiesling, 2013). I am sure that there has to be thoughtful consideration, attention, and support given to these students. However, they are sometimes misunderstood and characterized as being without language even though many children have confident language abilities in their own languages (Gee, 1996; Labov, 1972). The learners' home language is a valuable asset in globalized society. However, these students are often unconsciously forced to forget their home language in the process of learning the norm language; in fact, most third-generation immigrants have entirely lost the use of their home language (Milroy & Llamas, 2013). This rapid language loss requires educators' attention and, at the same time, requires a shift in the dominant perspective that currently values only a standard English dialect in the public education system.

As a non-native English speaker, I feel that I have some advantages to help ELLs because I have experienced identity changes (Kiesling, 2013) and employed English in different “communities of practices” (Meyerhoff & Strycharz, 2013, p. 428) which are inseparable from language learning. From my language learning

experiences, it seems to me that ELLs benefit from building “multi-layered” (Kiesling, 2013, p. 463) identities. This is how I negotiated learning English in various settings. While keeping pride in who I am and the language I speak, I am able to adapt to the dominant language and culture in order to fit harmoniously into this community. By employing standardized academic English, I try to become a member of the doctoral student community. On the other hand, I speak Korean borrowing a few English words with my children and sometimes with English language learners from Korea because I want to build a strong cultural and linguistic bond with them. I sometimes copy the way native Americans speak English in my community and thus, I don’t want to be an outsider.

Looking back on my language learning experiences, I realized that I have chosen a type of language based on both my own will and unavoidable forces around me. Now, as a doctoral student, I, once again, feel the shift of language paradigms especially in standardized academic English. My views about English have changed from viewing English as somebody else’s language to adopting it as my second language so that I can communicate with people from different cultures and linguistic backgrounds. I feel that I have more power over using English. I employ standardized English as my tool to communicate with other doctoral students and professors and to assert my point of view.

Still, I do not think that people understand how many different language variations they are using. There is no static English structure because language always changes. Furthermore, I am certain that each person will experience the shift of language paradigm while meeting diverse people, gaining new learning experiences, and building careers.

As an educator, language variationist, and future researcher, I would like to invite people who speak a variety of English to enjoy and celebrate what they are and who they are. English is not owned by only some countries or cultures. English is a language that anybody is able to own and use as a lingua franca. This way, anyone who respects uniqueness and difference can be a language variationist.

References

- Fought, C. (2013). Ethnicity. In J. K. Chambers & N. Schilling (2nd ed.), *The handbook of language variation and change* (pp. 387-406). Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Foulkes, P., Docherty, G., & Watt, D. (1999). Tracking the emergence of structured variation. *Leeds Working Papers in Linguistics and Phonetics*, 7, 1-25.
- Gee, J. P. (1996). *Social linguistics and literacies: Ideology in discourses* (2nd ed.). London: Traylor & Francis.
- Gee, J. P. (2013). Reading as situated language: A sociocognitive perspective. In D. E. Alvermann, N. J. Unrau, & R. B. Ruddell (6th ed.). *Theoretical models and processes of reading* (pp. 136-151). Newark, DE: International Reading Association.
- Johnstone, B. (2004). Place, globalization, and linguistic variation. In C. Fought (Ed.), *Sociolinguistic variation: Critical reflections* (pp. 65-83). New York: Oxford University Press.

- Kiesling, S. F. (2013). Constructing identity. In J. K. Chambers & N. Schilling (2nd ed.), *The handbook of language variation and change* (pp. 448-467). Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Labov, W. (1972). *Language in the inner city*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Labov, W. (1990). The intersection of sex and social class in the course of linguistic change. *Language Variation and Change*, 2, 205-54.
- Meyerhoff, M. & Strycharz, A. (2013). Communities of practice. In J. K. Chambers & N. Schilling (2nd ed.), *The handbook of language variation and change* (pp. 428-447). Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Milroy, L. & Llamas, C. (2013). Social networks. In J. K. Chambers & N. Schilling (2nd ed.), *The handbook of language variation and change* (pp. 409-427). Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Roberts, J. (2013). Child language variation. In J. K. Chambers & N. Schilling (2nd ed.), *The handbook of language variation and change* (pp. 263-276). Malden, MA: Blackwell.

Rueda, R. (2013). 21st-century skills: Cultural, linguistic, and motivational perspectives. In D. E. Alvermann, N. J. Unrau, & R. B. Ruddell (6th ed.), *Theoretical models and processes of reading* (pp. 1241-1267). Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

Wolfram, W., Carter, P., & Moriello, B. (2004). Emerging Hispanic English: New dialect formation in the American South. *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 8, 339-358.