

**“Baby, Darling, Honey!”**  
**Constructing a Competence of English in South Korean TV Shows**

Joseph Sung-Yul Park  
*University of California, Santa Barbara*

*This paper discusses how humorous use of English in South Korean TV comedy shows constructs a negative competence of English attributed to Koreans. In the TV shows analyzed, Koreans are depicted as unable to carry on a conversation in English, and only capable of using a markedly “bad English” which can be characterized by the use of stereotypical American English phrases and expressions that are clearly elementary, as well as hyper-Koreanized pronunciation of words. Together with the use of subtitling that does not presume a complex understanding of English, these practices contribute to a construction of a negative English competence for Koreans. This negative competence can be analyzed as an ideological construct, as it is treated as something that is shared among all Koreans.*

*I argue that this ideology of “Koreans as bad speakers of English” may lead Koreans to perceive their community as being subordinate to that of native English speakers, thus reproducing the cultural hegemony of English in the globalizing world (Pennycook, 1994, 1998). This suggests that, in contrast to Mock Spanish (Hill, 1993, 2001), construction of competence may also be used in a self-deprecatative manner, causing a community of speakers to put themselves in a subordinate position in relation to other dominant communities.*

**1. Construction of Competence, Construction of Community<sup>1</sup>**

It is now widely recognized by scholars in the humanities and social sciences that communities are socially constructed, rather than given, and that language is an important means through which such construction is accomplished (Anderson, 1991; Silverstein, 1998; Irvine & Gal, 2000). If language does play a crucial role in drawing boundaries between communities and establishing identities, we would imagine that the notion of language *competence* as perceived by speakers should be one central aspect in such processes. The idea of “competence” that I use here is not the theoretical concept that generative linguists contrast with “performance.” Rather, I mean simply “how well one

---

<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to Mary Bucholtz and Sandy Thompson for their close reading of a draft of this paper and for their suggestions. I also thank Pat Clancy, Jack Du Bois, Jan Frodesen, and the participants at SALSA XI, who gave me helpful comments. The fieldwork for this study was supported in part by a grant from the Division of Humanities and Fine Arts, College of Letters and Science, at University of California at Santa Barbara.

speaks a language,” as displayed or evaluated by speakers within a community. The notion of competence, understood in this manner, is at the interface between an individual speaker and how that speaker is perceived within a language community; it is the primary criterion by which a speaker’s relationship to a language, and thus to the community represented by that language, is understood. The fact that competence itself is subject to social and linguistic construction suggests that construction of competence can play a significant role in the construction of language communities.<sup>2</sup>

This construction of competence can be accomplished in two ways: positively and negatively. A *positive construction of competence* is the more obvious way of constructing community. For example, the notion of “native speaker,” often associated with a positive competence of a language, is used to define in-group members of many linguistic communities. In addition, in language crossing (Rampton, 1995), even non-native speakers of a language may make a claim to positive competence of that language by adopting, for example, stylistic features of that language, thus creating a hybrid identity and an interracial community of speakers that may stand in opposition to larger dominating communities. On the other hand, a *negative construction of competence* (i.e., claiming that one *cannot* speak a language) may play an important role in the formation of certain communities as well. Thus, when White Americans produce “Mock Spanish” through hyperanglicization of Spanish words and blatant violation of Spanish morphosyntax, they can be seen as distancing themselves from Spanish-speaking Americans and constructing an imagined community from which the racialized Other is excluded (Hill, 1993, 2001). Claims that one cannot speak a language, then, can be an important ideological step for dominant groups to trivialize and subordinate minority groups.

However, we might also want to consider the possibility that construction of negative competence may serve as a way for non-dominant communities to rationalize their subordinate position. South Korea is a case in point here. South Korea (henceforth Korea) is a highly monolingual country; for virtually all domains of everyday life, Korean is the only language used for communicative purposes. However, there is also much emphasis on English language learning in Korea. English has been an important language in Korea since an intricate relationship with the United States began after the end of modern Japanese rule, but it has become even more significant in recent years, as the need to be competent in the international market has become more crucial for Korea’s economic stability. Students receive mandatory English education throughout primary and secondary school, and English plays an important part in college entrance and graduation as well as in employment and promotion. For this reason, many Koreans strive hard to achieve good English skills, making large investments of time and money at private language schools both for themselves and their children, to the extent that English is often considered to be an emotional and economic burden. Nonetheless, they frequently express dissatisfaction with their ability in English; in informal sociolinguistic interviews or public language debates, one easily encounters explicit metalinguistic comments such as “Koreans don’t speak English well.”

---

<sup>2</sup> In order to highlight the socially constructed nature of competence, I use in this paper the expression “competence *of*” (a language), rather than the more familiar “competence *in*.” I believe this expression captures the fact that constructed competence is an individual’s or a group’s claim about (i.e., “of”) a language, rather than an inherent property of a speaker or a group of speakers which can be measured in terms of (i.e., “in”) the established norm of a language.

While these kinds of metalinguistic statements are an important part of how a negative competence of English may come to be established and shared by Koreans, it is also important to see how Koreans' competence of English is constructed through other types of discourse in which there is not explicit attention towards language, since only then can we observe whether and how such beliefs about language is taken up by speakers in their discourse in everyday domains. In this paper, I discuss how an image of negative English competence might be constructed for Korean speakers in one such domain of discourse: Korean television shows. Even though all Korean television entertainment shows are broadcast in the Korean language, English is often used as a resource for humor in these shows. This use of English is rarely employed as an explicit commentary on the meaning of English in Korean society, but rather for the purposes of entertainment, for example, characterization of people, generating particular types of situations, and providing material for language play. However, as instances of language practice, it is also true that such uses of English reflect and contribute to the circulation of ideologies of English. In fact, we would expect that, as a type of discourse where language is not the primary matter of concern and as a type of discourse that is spread widely through the medium of television, the images of Korean speakers and their English competence constructed through such discourse would play a very powerful part in the construction of a Korean competence of English.

In this paper, I will show how the humorous use of English in Korean television shows may aid in the construction of a negative English competence for Korean speakers, and discuss the effect this might have on the construction of the Korean language community. I argue that this projection of negative competence of English may play an important role in the construction of the Korean language community vis-à-vis the global community represented by English. However, in contrast to cases in which dominant communities construct their negative competence of less dominant languages (as in Mock Spanish), I show that, in the Korean case, the construction of negative competence of the globally-dominant English language may have self-deprecatative results. Koreans' imagined lack of English competence may lead them to perceive themselves as a marginal part of the global community, imagined as centered in the English-speaking West. In this sense, the construction of competence might be an important mechanism through which reproduction of the cultural hegemony of English in the globalizing world (Pennycook, 1994, 1998) can take place in local context.

## **2. Constructing a Negative Competence of English**

For this study, twenty instances of humorous uses of English in scripted Korean TV entertainment shows, including situation comedies (sitcoms), sketch comedies, and stand-up comedy routines, were collected from 2000 to 2002. The particular examples that I will show in this paper all come from sitcoms. In this section, I outline several ways in which negative competence of English is constructed through these data.

### *2.1. Focusing on Inability in English*

One of the ways in which negative English competence is constructed is through portraying the sheer inability of Koreans to command English. In other words, Koreans are represented as unable to produce or comprehend any English as well as stressed and embarrassed when they try to speak it.

For instance, in example (1), the Korean characters are depicted as almost fearful of carrying out a conversation with a White foreigner speaking English. In this example,

Seonyeong, a lifeguard at a large swimming pool, is approached by a White male foreigner, wearing only tight swimming trunks, who asks directions in English to a bookshop so that he can purchase a guidebook. Not knowing what to do, she calls three other lifeguards passing by (Jin, Taeseong, and Yunhui), but they are not of much help as, one-by-one, they make some kind of excuse and run away.

- (1) From the sitcom *olenji* 'Orange', 7/23/2002<sup>3</sup>
- 1 Foreigner: You know where is it? <LL>
- 2 Seonyeong: (hesitating nervously) Heh heh ... H... Hi ... (waves hand) <L>
- 3 Foreigner: Heh I'm looking for a guide.  
((lines omitted))
- 4 Foreigner: Where is the bookshop. Come on guys, It's nice weather. I wanna look for a bookshop.
- 5 Seonyeong: (calling other guards) Ya, ya ya ya ya. illu wa illu wa. illu wa. ppalli.  
"Hey, come here. Come here. Quick."  
(Jin, Taeseong, and Yunhui come running)
- 6 Jin: way?  
"Why?"
- 7 Seonyeong: mweolagu haneunji jom deuleobwa jom.  
"Listen to what he says."
- 8 Jin: mweo?  
"What?"
- 9 Foreigner: (to Taeseong) Mister, I'm looking for a book. I mean, where is the book. Tell me where is the book.
- 10 Taeseong: Heh heh ... me? heh ...  
(yelling towards someone) ajeossi, geo mweo hasineun geoyeeo?  
"Mister, what are you doing?"  
(runs off) <LL>
- 11 Foreigner: (to Yunhui) You know where is the book? I mean, book.
- 12 Yunhui: (nodding) aha ... (yelling towards someone) eo ajumma,  
"Oh Ma'am,"  
geogi gamyeon andwaeyo andwae! (runs off) <L>  
"you can't go there!"
- 13 Seonyeong: (to Yunhui) mwo- a jeo geo- (to Jin) ya ya gimjin! ya ya.  
"What- Oh that-" "Hey, Jin!"
- 14 Foreigner: (to Jin) Man, heheh, OK, you are the last person. I need book.
- 15 Jin: heh heh ... (looks at Seonyeong)
- 16 Seonyeong: (to Jin) eo eo.  
"So?"
- 17 Jin: satuliga neomu simhaeseo mos aladeudgessda. (runs off) <LL>  
"I can't understand him because he speaks a heavy dialect."

When the foreigner asks a question in English, Seonyeong laughs nervously and is only able to produce what most Korean viewers would recognize as a misplaced greeting: "h ... hi ..." in line 2. Similarly, the other lifeguards, when called by Seonyeong, laugh

<sup>3</sup> The underlined parts of the examples were produced originally in English. Audience response is coded with angled brackets (<>). Edited "audience laughter" or laugh track is marked with L: <L> for short, quiet laughter, <LL> for longer, louder laughter. Romanization of Korean follows the Ministry of Culture and Tourism system (announced on July 4<sup>th</sup>, 2000).

nervously and make up excuses to escape the situation. The first two (Taeseong and Yunhui) run off as if they see an emergency that they must take care of, and the other (Jin) pretends that he can speak English perfectly well but that communication is not possible because the foreigner's English is problematic.

In fact, Jin's comment regarding the foreigner's English is ironic, since the actor who plays the foreigner is not a native speaker of English (as can be seen from the utterances he produces above, which would be considered ungrammatical by native speakers of most varieties of English, and also from his pronunciation), even though he is depicted as an American within the show. However, the casting of a non-native speaker of English to play this foreigner does not appear to be intended by the producers, as there is no reference to his language in other portions of the episode. While the question of whether the producers were aware of the actor's accent and whether his physical characteristics were more crucial in his casting than his language is very interesting (the actor is a tall handsome male with long hair), there is no space to discuss this issue here. Suffice it to say that Jin's claim that the foreigner speaks a *satuli* "dialect, patois" (line 17) of English is not meant to be interpreted in the show as a real evaluation of the foreigner's English (a judgment a Korean is not supposed to be capable of making), but simply an absurd excuse. This is also supported by the fact that a laugh track is inserted after Jin's last line; if this were a serious comment on the foreigner's (actor's) accent, we would not expect it to be marked as funny by the producers in this way.

What is of interest for this paper is that the Korean characters in the example not only display their inability to speak English, but also show strong anxiety, as they display nervous laughter and produce obviously contrived excuses in order to avoid speaking to a foreigner. Thus, this constructs a negative competence of English through images of Koreans being unable and afraid to speak English.

## 2.2. "Bad English" and Its Linguistic Features

However, it is not the case that Korean characters in the data never speak any kind of English. Negative competence of English is also constructed through the way Korean characters *do* use English; when Korean characters speak English in these television shows, they are shown to speak a markedly "bad English." One example of this is shown in example (2).

In this example, Sangmyeon and Dahun make a resolution that they will study and master English. In an effort to use English in everyday life, they make an agreement to speak only English in front of each other; the first to fall short on the agreement must pay the other a certain amount of money. At the beginning of example (2), Sangmyeon and Dahun are sitting at a café and drinking beer, when Dahun's girlfriend Sujeong calls him on his cell phone. Sujeong does not yet know that Dahun has made the agreement. But since Sangmyeon is watching, Dahun cannot speak to Sujeong in Korean, and the following conversation occurs.

- (2) From the sitcom *Se chingu* 'Three Friends', 8/21/2000
- 1 (cell phone rings, Sangmyeon and Dahun both search for their cell phones) <LL>
  - 2 Dahun: Oh, My... my hand phone. (answers phone) Oh, Sujeong!
  - 3 Sujeong: wuri naeil myeochsie mannalgeoya?  
"When are we going to meet tomorrow?"
  - 4 Dahun: Oh, ... I love you baby! <L>

- 5 Sujeong: gabjagi museun soliya? naeil myeochoisie mannal geonyagu.  
 “What are you talking about? I asked you when we’re going to meet tomorrow.”
- 6 Dahun: (hesitating nervously) Um ... , um...
- 7 Sangmyeon: (making a circle with thumb and index finger, smiling) Money, Money! Korean, no! No! (meaning Dahun will have to pay him if he speaks Korean) <LL>
- 8 Dahun: I love you baby, uh, sugar, uh ... , baby ..., darling, honey!<LL>
- 9 Sujeong: gabjagi jakku ttansoliya way?  
 “Why do you keep saying that?”  
 ayu naeil mannagi silheumyeon mannaji ma.  
 “If you don’t want to see me, then don’t!”  
 euiyu jinija ...  
 “Gosh...” (hangs up, angrily)
- 10 Dahun: Su, Su, Sujeong? Oh, Sujeong! Oh... <L> (hangs up, worried)  
Ah... Oh my god...<LL>  
 “Oh..”
- 11 Sangmyeon: (handing over glass, laughing) Drink! Drink! Drink!<L>
- 12 Dahun: (pushes away glass) No! No! Oh my...

While the characters in this example, unlike those in example (1), do manage to speak some English, their English is marked in a certain way so that it is obvious to the viewers that their English cannot possibly be “good” English. First, the characters are depicted as using English vocabulary or phrases that are clearly recognizable to the viewers as elementary. For example, Sangmyeon’s lines are simply a list of basic English words such as *money*, *Korean*, *no* (line 7) or *drink* (line 11), without any kind of grammatical construction involved. Second, there is much use of stereotypical phrases of popular English—the sort of English use that is familiar to Koreans through forms of popular culture such as American films and pop music. Dahun’s use of *I love you baby* (lines 4, 8), *sugar*, *baby*, *darling*, *honey* (line 8), and *oh my god* (line 10), all accompanied with exaggerated prosody, are examples of such English phrases. This symbolic use of English makes clear to the viewers that Dahun is simply mimicking popular images of English speakers or styles, rather than actually speaking or knowing the language. The use of these marked features thus emphasizes for the viewers that the characters only have superficial knowledge of English acquired through cursory learning of English or exposure to pop culture.

Example (3) shows more features of “bad English.” In this example, Donggeun is recording a video message for his friend Jaeun, who is studying in the U.S. Their mutual friend, Yeongjun, wants to take part in this message, too, but he wants to make a recording in English, since he thinks Jaeun’s American friends will also be watching the video. He talks his girlfriend Dabin into recording with him as well, and the following is what they say into the camera.

- (3) From the sitcom *nyu nonseutop* ‘New Non-stop’, 9/21/2001
- 1 Yeongjun: Hi Jaeun, I’m Yeongjun.
- 2 Dabin: Hi Jaeun sister, I’m Yeongjun’s girlfriend Dabin.
- 3 Yeongjun: I’m a boy.<L>
- 4 Dabin: I’m a girl.<LL>
- 5 Yeongjun: I’m a student.
- 6 Dabin: I’m a student, too.<L>
- 7 Together: We are students.<LL><Clapping>

Here, as in example (2), we can see the use of English that is clearly marked as elementary. In this case, however, it is marked as basic not simply because the words involved are simple, but also because the sentences that the characters produce are recognizably of the type of sentences one encounters when beginning to learn English as a foreign language.

In addition, especially salient in this example is the hyper-Koreanized pronunciation of English words. For example, we can see monophthongization in certain words; in these words, the diphthongs used in most varieties of American English are produced as a sequence of two vowels in separate syllables, as in [βo.ɪ] ‘boy’ (line 3), or as a single monophthong, as in the second syllable of [σɔ.τ<sup>h</sup>υ.δ ϕv.τ<sup>h</sup>ɔ] ‘student’ (lines 5, 6), which most native speakers of American English normally pronounce as [φʊ]. The pronunciation of “student” also involves an insertion of a high back unrounded vowel [ɔ] to avoid the consonant clusters [στ] and [vτ]. While these are general features of Koreanization, these features are emphasized in the data so that the English used by the characters sounds far-removed from the English used by its native speakers; for example, the vowels of “boy” and “student” in (3) are pronounced very clearly so that their quality as monophthongs is made prominent. Another example of hyper-Koreanized pronunciation are the rhythmic features; the sentences are pronounced to fit the syllable timing of Korean instead of the stress timing of English, thus highlighting the characters’ unfamiliarity with English pronunciation.

Thus, the employment of these features in the data constructs the variety of English used by Koreans as “bad English,” which is extremely basic, fraught with Koreanisms, full of superficial expressions from popular culture, and inadequate for communicative use in real life. In turn, this type of depiction of the English used by Koreans constructs an image of Koreans as “bad speakers” of English.

### 2.3. *Presuppositions for the Use of Subtitles*

I have suggested above that depiction of the characters’ incompetence in English and their use of “bad English” constructs a negative English competence for Koreans. But what evidence do we have that suggests that this negative English competence is attributed to all Koreans, rather than only those characters in the shows? In particular, we might question whether the viewers are simply expected to laugh at the characters in the TV shows for their lack of English skills. If this were the case, this may suggest that actually a *positive* competence of English is constructed, for the viewers would then be presupposed to have a better knowledge of English than the characters in the shows.

I argue that this is not the case. In the data, not all segments involving English are treated in the same way. One primary difference is that some segments are accompanied with subtitles that translate the English into Korean, while others are not. As I will show below, the segments that receive subtitling are the ones which involve more “complex” English usage than others; this points to a presupposition that the viewers do possess a certain amount of knowledge of English, but not anything more complex than that of the characters in the television shows. Since this presupposition attributes a negative English competence to the viewers and not only the television show characters, the different treatment of segments through subtitling can be seen as another way through which a negative competence of English is constructed in the data.

Example (4) is one such segment where, unlike examples (1) through (3) above, the English used in the scene is accompanied with subtitles. This example is a segment that appears later in the episode that contains example (2). Here, Sangmyeon, one of the characters in (2), has an encounter with a foreigner, a middle-aged White American, whose wife is a friend of Sangmyeon's sister. Sangmyeon takes this opportunity to practice the phrases he has learned (or, rather, memorized) at English language school—specifically, the greeting sequence “How are you? I’m fine, and you? Me too!” However, Sangmyeon makes a small mistake:

- (4) From the sitcom *Se chingu* ‘Three Friends’, 8/21/2000<sup>4</sup>
- 1 Sangmyeon: Who are you? <L> {dangsineun nugasipnikka?}  
“Who are you?”
  - 2 Foreigner: Me? I’m Sukja’s husband. {nayo? sukja nampyeonio.}  
“Me? Sukja’s husband.”
  - 3 Sangmyeon: Me, too! <LL> {jeoduyo!}  
“Me, too!”
  - 4 Foreigner: What? {mweolagu?} (gets angry, and leaves)  
“What?”<sup>5</sup>

Why does this example, unlike other examples, have subtitles that translate the English? This example is different from the others in that, even though it is based on a memorized routine, deviating from it slightly, an exchange with a person with a command of “real English” (as opposed to the “bad English” of Koreans) actually occurs. To understand the main point of the humor, and why and how the conversation turns awry, one must be able to interpret what is going on from the perspective of the foreigner, based on a “correct” knowledge of English grammar. In other words, the viewers cannot understand the humor of this example by simply noticing English is being used as a symbol of pop culture or for its own sake, as they would be able to in earlier examples. In this sense, the use of English in example (4) goes beyond the “bad English” which is presumed to be shared among Koreans, and, for this reason, subtitles are considered necessary by the producers. The fact that the knowledge of the difference between “how are you?” and “who are you?” is arguably only slightly more complex than the knowledge required to understand the earlier examples makes this example more remarkable.

The fact that an English usage that is only slightly more complex than the “bad English” in the previous examples receives different treatment in its presentation, then, points to an underlying assumption that the Korean viewers of these shows are not able to understand anything more than “bad English.” For this reason, the viewers are not treated as competent English speakers, but as having exactly the same level of English competence as those characters in the television shows that they may be laughing at. I argue that this should be seen as one of the ways through which an image of Koreans as bad speakers of English is constructed, not only for the characters in the television shows, but for the viewers as well.

<sup>4</sup> The Korean subtitles that appear at the bottom of the screen are transcribed here in curly brackets, with my translation below them.

<sup>5</sup> As shown in Sarah Meacham’s paper in this volume, there is a widely-circulated joke that is almost identical to this example but which is based on an encounter between Japanese prime minister Yoshiro Mori and United States president Bill Clinton. I presume the writers of the show adapted this segment from this joke, which has also been circulated on the Internet in Korean translation.



One might argue here that it could be the case that the subtitles are intended for the subgroup of Koreans that are least knowledgeable in English, rather than for all Koreans. Since there must be a wide range of variation in the English ability among Koreans, we would indeed expect the producers of the shows to have different assumptions about the English ability among different groups of Koreans. However, what is important here is that the selective use of subtitles reflects a sharp underlying distinction between “bad English,” which is assumed to be shared by all Koreans (and thus without the need of explanation by subtitling), and a more “legitimate” English, which is believed more likely to be inaccessible to Koreans in general. Then, the presence of subtitles in segments such as example (4) and the lack of it in others can be seen as an instantiation of presuppositions regarding the English ability of Koreans, and also a way through which a negative English competence is constructed.

In sum, a negative competence of English is constructed through the various ways in which Korean speakers and the English they use are treated in the data, such as depicting Koreans as incapable of communicating in English and nervous when trying to do so, attributing a markedly “bad English” to Korean characters, and using subtitles for segments that involve English usage that is considered to be more difficult than “bad English.”

### 3. Ideological Aspects of Negative Competence of English

It should be noted that this construction of negative competence of English is an ideological construction, rather than a reflection of the actual competence of Koreans. As monolingual speakers of Korean, it is true that most Korean speakers do not use English in their everyday lives. For that reason, they cannot be expected to be fluent speakers of English, even though they receive years of English education. However, there are reasons to believe that the depiction of Koreans as lacking competence in English is not simply an objective description of their linguistic ability. Rather, it can be seen as an instantiation of a language ideology of self-deprecation that views Koreans as bad speakers of English.

The ideology of self-deprecation can be identified in several ways. We can observe that anxiety and nervousness are recurrent themes in the examples; Koreans are depicted as being ashamed and embarrassed by the fact that they cannot communicate well in English. This is most noticeable in example (1), where nervousness about talking to a foreigner speaking English is the motif, but we can also see it in other examples; for example, in (2), Dahun’s nervous hesitation in line 6 shows similar embarrassment at not being able to speak English. The audience laughter inserted after the cell phone rings (line 1) also suggests such an orientation; it suggests that there is the anticipation of something embarrassing, and thus humorous, when one of the characters must speak on the phone in English. Thus, the examples do not simply make the claim “we Koreans don’t speak English”; there is also an assumption that “we Koreans *should* be able to speak English, but we can’t.” Otherwise, inability in English itself need not lead to this insecurity. In other words, there is also a sense of submission to English, and an acknowledgement of English as a necessity in their lives. This, again, can be seen as an ideological evaluation of the status of English and the position of Koreans in relation to English.

The fact that the use of English by the characters is meant to be funny, as made clear by the insertion of laugh tracks immediately after the characters’ use of English, supports this analysis. The characters’ English is considered funny and absurd, at least in part, because it is seen as falling short of an expected competence; this in turn points to an underlying assumption that Koreans *should* be able to produce some English better than

that used by these characters. However, at the same time, it is clear that such expectations cannot come from a belief that Koreans do actually have a good command of English. As we have seen above, there is also an assumption that Korean viewers do not have any real competence of English and are incapable of understanding much more than the bad English used in the television shows, as evidenced by the use of subtitles in some segments. Then, the assumption that Koreans should have some competence in English must come from a belief about the status of English itself—that English is a necessity, regardless of the monolingualism of Korea, and that English is a language of global importance. For this reason, the establishment of Koreans as bad speakers of English can be seen as a form of self-deprecation: Koreans are “not good enough,” as they are not in command of the all-important global language of English.

Self-deprecating humor does not mean that Korean speakers simply enjoy denigrating themselves. It is possible that Koreans also find these examples funny because they recognize the cleverness of the language play; in examples such as (2) and (3), the viewers might find humorous the novel ways in which the characters put together simple words and phrases in an effort to communicate in a particular situation. As such, the humor of these examples need not be a critical self-commentary regarding Koreans’ ability in English. English, as a linguistic resource for Koreans available through education and exposure to American popular culture, is simply something Koreans can draw on to produce language play, and that language play need not be self-deprecative in itself. However, the asymmetry in the way English and Korean are used in relation to each other to produce humorous effects does suggest that there is an underlying self-deprecative ideology that is reflected in the television shows. For example, the humorous use of English always makes fun of Korean speakers having trouble with English, even though cross-linguistic language play can occur in several other configurations, such as English speakers having trouble with Korean or Korean speakers playing with Korean-English puns without necessarily getting into a difficult situation. Therefore, even if the humorous uses of English in the television shows are meant to be amusing instances of language play, the fact that only a certain type of language play occurs in these shows suggests that such humor is constrained by an ideology that views Korean speakers as lacking the crucial resource of English.

For this reason, the construction of negative competence of English can be seen as a reflection of ideologies of English that are shared among Koreans: ideologies that view English as a necessity in Korean society and that imagine Koreans as bad speakers of English. At the same time, the Korean television shows, in which a negative competence of English is constructed, become sites for the reproduction of those language ideologies as well.

#### **4. The Korean Language Community and the Global Hegemony of English**

What kind of effect, then, does the construction of negative competence of English have on the construction of the Korean language community? First, it produces the effect of differentiation: establishing the local Korean language community in contrast to the global language community represented by English. Koreans’ imagined lack of English skills produces an image of English as a language that is distant from Korean speakers, and this in turn may iconically place the Korean language community as maximally distant from the English-speaking center of the global community. This may then project a distinct image of a Korean language community by indexing a unique Korean identity.

However, it is also important to note the way the construction of negative competence is combined with the ideology of self-deprecation. As discussed above, Koreans' negative competence of English is framed not simply as an absence of English but an absence of English *despite* the necessity of English, and this can be understood as an acknowledgement of the global hegemony of English as an international language (Pennycook, 1994). Since the cultural hegemony of English also indexes the hegemony of the English-speaking West and the global world order it represents, this amounts to a subordination of the Korean language community to the global community. The values of the global community, which is seen as being in "possession" of English, then may take on a privileged status, leading to the justification of unequal relationships that the global community has with the local Korean community. For example, the ideology of Koreans as bad speakers of English may serve as a rationalization for the negative consequences of globalization for Korea, such as the financial crisis of the late 1990s. In other words, the lack of English competence is perceived as a deterrent to Korea's competitiveness in the global market.<sup>6</sup>

The Korean case, then, provides an interesting contrast with the case of Mock Spanish (Hill, 1993, 2001). As with Mock Spanish used by Anglo Americans, the construction of negative competence of English allows Koreans to define and establish their language community to the exclusion of speakers of "the other language." However, while Mock Spanish serves as a means to subordinate the Other who speaks a different and distant language, humorous uses of English in Korean television shows has the effect of subordinating the Korean community itself and acknowledging the hegemony of English and the process of globalization it represents. While there are also counter-discourses in circulation within Korean society that resist and challenge the global hegemony of English, the examples in this paper show how the hegemony of English may be reproduced despite such resistance. In fact, the reproduction of hegemony through humor and the medium of television can be quite powerful; humor can mask the political nature of the construction of competence, and such effects can have a particularly wide impact when broadcast throughout Korean society.

Construction of competence may in fact be one of the ways through which the global hegemony of English is maintained and reproduced. It might be possible that, at least in some situations, the hegemony of the language of the powerful (e.g., colonial) Other, simply because it is felt as foreign to the local language community, may remain out of reach for the speakers of local languages. In such cases, negative construction of competence could reserve the power of the hegemonic language exclusively to the community of its original speakers, and preserve the position of that language as the hegemonic variety. However, at the same time, if such a construction of community is achieved by specific linguistic practices for the construction of competence, the sites of these practices might also be places where the power of the hegemonic languages can be challenged. If this is the case, the construction of competence can be seen as a truly

---

<sup>6</sup> For example, an article in *Chosun Ilbo*, one of the major newspapers in South Korea, argues that a government official in charge of monetary policy, at an international press conference held shortly after the onset of the financial crisis, "failed to express [to the international society] Korea's will for economic recovery and tarnished its credibility because of his incompetent English" (translation mine). The article goes on to list several cases which it claims to be demonstrations of Korean officials' inability in English negatively influencing foreign trade negotiations ("Jidocheung 'jjalbeun yeongeotase gugig keun pihae' [Huge damages to national interest due to our leaders' "short English"], January 3rd, 2000).

complex means of reproducing and contesting language ideologies. The findings of the present study challenge us to explore that terrain in greater detail.

### References

- Anderson, B. (1991). *Imagined communities*. London: Verso.
- Hill, J. H. (1993). *Hasta la vista, baby*: Anglo Spanish in the American Southwest. *Critique of Anthropology*, 13(2), 145-176.
- Hill, J. H. (2001). Mock Spanish, covert racism, and the (leaky) boundary between public and private spheres. In S. Gal and K. Woolard (Eds.), *Languages and publics: The making of authority*. (pp. 83-102). Manchester: St. Jerome.
- Irvine, J. T., & Gal, S. (2000). Language ideology and linguistic differentiation. In P. V. Kroskrity (Ed.) *Regimes of language: Ideologies, politics, and identities*. (pp. 35-84). Santa Fe: School of American Research Press.
- Pennycook, A. (1994). *The cultural politics of English as an international language*. London: Longman.
- Pennycook, A. (1998). *English and the discourses of colonialism*. London: Routledge.
- Rampton, B. (1995). *Crossing: Language and ethnicity among adolescents*. London: Longman.
- Silverstein, M. (1998). Contemporary linguistic transformations of local linguistic communities. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 27, 401-426.

Department of Linguistics  
University of California, Santa Barbara  
Santa Barbara, CA 93106  
jsp0@umail.ucsb.edu