If you can't beat em … : Gay communities and post structural gender constructions in South Korea

Throughout the past century, the Northeast Asian post-colonial region of South Chohsorn (South Korea), highly influenced by geographical position, and a long history of attempted (internal as well as external) hegemony, has developed rigid and pervasive social systems. Most, if not all of these social systems have acted to facilitate the construction of, defend, and maintain national identity in an age of global transnational market competitiveness and neoliberalism, and in an era of soluble national borders. Through this maintenance, and in concomitance with other oppressive discourses, such as Confucianism and patriarchy, and inculcation of ideologies stipulating the redundancy of individual identity, authorities have successfully maintained an authoritarian stronghold over nation and all of its subgroups and communities, by repeatedly and continuously calling for national identity (Shin 2006; Armstrong 2007; Buzo 2007), but at the expense of conceptions of individual identity. This oppressive call has evidenced itself in multifarious discourses, including language, fashion, music, cultural models, standard of living, education, and sexuality, and language contact.

To determine the nature and extent of the influences and effects of these oppressive discourses on gay communities, this study builds on other studies of LGBT communities, conducted in western regions (Bucholtz and Hall 2004; Leap and Boellstorff 2004; Edley and Wetherell 2008; Weinberg 2009), and those of studies of gay linguistics in Asia (Boellstorf 2005), to explore the language practices of gay communities in Seoul. Subsequently, the study has sought to determine whether and to what extent members of these communities, while linguistically constructing and negotiating gender identities, index larger-social-network discourses, and hence those discourses pervasive throughout the social domains of South Chohsorn. The study integrates interview and language documentation data of five gay communities, collected at gay frequented clubs in downtown Seoul, with a 14-year ethnography. The study then employs discourse analysis (Harrington et al. 2002), to evidence that members of these gay communities index larger social network discourses, which in turn mediate the queer constructions of social and gender identities (Foucault 1978; Ochs 1992). The Discourse Analysis becomes grounded in theories of social and gender identity (Foucault 1978; Butler 1990), while eliciting themes that describe the linguistic anthropologies (Ochs 1992; Silverstein 2003) of these communities. Ultimately, the study determines that Ethnolinguistic and other Vitalities act as predictors of shifting indexicality, during which speakers and members of these communities converge toward indexing situated factors, and diverge toward indexing larger social cultural factors during constructions of gender identities.

The study finds that members of these communities both legitimize and delegitimize oppressive discourses in seemingly contradictory fashion, a contradiction which itself reflects practices common to larger social network models. The study contributes to current work in language and identity by explicating ways in which speakers negotiate language and identity, so to shift and switch across orders of indexicality, and hence to position and reposition self and other in these communities of practice.

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