

# Korean language and identity

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# Types of “Korean”

- Ethnic Koreans born and raised in Korea
- Ethnic Koreans from Korea who have moved elsewhere
  - To where? (North America, Europe, or somewhere else?)
  - Why? (For work or school?)
  - For how long (Less than a few years, or permanently?)
- Ethnic Koreans who live or were born outside of Korea
  - Gyopo // 교포 – Typically for those in the West or Japan
  - Dongpo // 동포 – Typically used for those in China
    - Joseonjok // 조선족
    - Jaeoe dongpo // 재외동포

# Saldaon saram / 살다 온 사람

- Lit. “a person who lived somewhere and came back”
- An ethnic Korean born in Korea who moved abroad for some period of time, but then moved back to Korea
  - Would this person be considered a “gyopo”? Or just “Korean”?
- How does a person’s language use influence how “Korean” they are viewed to be?

# Three cases

- Saldaon saram (or, the “transnational elite”)
- Gyopo
- Mixed race men

# The historical gyopo

- *Historically*, a common trope in Korean culture has been “the Korean who is awful at English” – how shameful!
- Compared with the “global” gyopo / Korean-American
- Think LA, late 1990s. People with overseas (particularly American) experience were granted respect.



# The “transnational elite”

- According to Lo & Kim (2012), this idealization of the gyopo as the global Korean has lost ground to the new, modern “transnational elite” Korean embodied in the saldaon saram.
- A Korean person who has *added* to their linguistic repertoire through international experience
- *Controlled* displays of multilingualism (code-switching)
- Korean-ness is not compromised.

# The “transnational elite”

- This ideal is played out in popular culture
- Pasta / 파스타 (Drama, 2010)
- Seducing Mr. Perfect / Mr. 로빈 꼬시기 (Film, 2006)
- My lovely Sam-soon / 내 이름은 김삼순 (Drama, 2004)
- ... and many others



# What happened to the poor gyopo?

- In recent years it has become easier to find examples of gyopos being the target of ridicule.
- Compare the controlled code-switching of the multilingual transnational elite with the gyopo “unintentionally leaking English onto low registers of Korean”.
- An example can be found in the LA Sseurirang / LA 쓰리랑 sketch from Gag Concert (late 2009).
  - Uncontrolled influence of English
  - **Infantilization** (to treat or depict as a child)
  - Use of a non-standard Korean variety
  - Backwardness



# Korean-ness as a social construct

- But not everyone who has spent time abroad is portrayed as stupid because they can't speak Korean
  - Compare Korean-American and White speakers' use of Korean, or non-standard dialects (e.g. Robert Holley)
- Even some Korean-Americans can be cast as “Korean”, but their lack of Korean language skill is either hidden or overlooked.
- In other words, being “Korean” isn't entirely dependent on your language, or even your race.

# Case in point: Mixed race men

- Lo & Kim (2011) contrast two mixed race men.

Daniel Henney



Ricky Kim



# Language competence as a social construct

- “Language competence should be understood as a social rather than cognitive phenomenon” (Blommaert et al. 2015)
- Henney has been portrayed as a “transnational elite” proficient in multiple languages

He is almost completely comfortable with day-to-day Korean, and word is that Henney has no problems communicating with those on set. In the movie, the actor delivers a final flourish in what is a fiendishly difficult language for foreigners to learn. (‘Daniel Henney Stuns with Innate Language Skills’, 2006)

- In fact he is not – his Korean is not that stellar, either.

# Language competence as a social construct

- Also depicted as a faithful Korean – learning Korean because he *is* Korean:

First, I will work hard on learning Korean to make Korea a permanent part of my life.  
(Y.J. Kim, 2005)

I want to become active as a ‘true Korean’ by studying Korean really hard. (M. Kim, 2005)

# But then poor Ricky Kim

- Very similar background as Henney, plus a college degree
- Is much more fluent, but is depicted as very poor at Korean in comedy programs (at least back in 2008...)
  - He is othered as not-quite-Korean.
  - But still Korean enough to be shamed (unlike a white person).
- At the same time, his English ability is questioned when he pronounces loanwords in a non-English way.
- If you have access, check out 스타골든벨 from October 18, 2008, at around 23:20.

# Conclusions

- Being “Korean” is partly just a production, and one’s Korean proficiency doesn’t necessarily play a role.
  - But, ironically, if people think you *should* be “Korean”, then your linguistic (in)competence can be used against you.
- Unsurprisingly, linguistic competence in Korea isn’t measured very objectively.
  - Race plays a big role, partly by determining people’s expectations.
  - If people want to see you as being good at Korean, they will, and if they don’t, they won’t.