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# Indescribable: The Construction and Enregisterment of Korean American Ethnolinguistic Identity

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines how young Korean Americans conceive of the relationship between their ethnic identity and linguistic behavior, focusing on metalinguistic commentary given on the topic of Korean American English (KAE). I argue that the ongoing enregisterment of a unique KAE variety is characterized by the fact that Korean Americans disagree on both what this variety sounds like and where the variety is spoken or where it comes from. Yet, a majority still contend that KAE exists. I connect this paradox to the historical struggle that Korean Americans have over language ownership and hybrid cultural identity.

## KEYWORDS

Korean American; Korean American English; raciolinguistics; enregisterment; sociolinguistic interview

## Introduction

Recent literature on global varieties of English is making headway in the challenge to legitimize Asian Englishes,<sup>1</sup> as English is often conceptualized as a language for white, Western speakers. This leaves Asian American speakers of English in a fraught position of perceived foreignness.<sup>2</sup> Asian Americans do not have a robust framework for understanding their use of English in the same way that other minoritized groups in the United States do. Compared to ethnolects such as African American English,<sup>3</sup> there is a dearth of understanding of what might be called Asian American English.

In this paper, I demonstrate that a specific Asian American variety of English, Korean American English (KAE), has a unique, liminal kind of existence, and I argue that questioning or problematizing it is useful for examining the intersections of Asian American identity negotiation and language ideology. I begin by analyzing the metalinguistic commentary of Korean Americans who were interviewed about their language backgrounds and language ideologies. Korean Americans are an ideal group to study through metalinguistic commentary, because Korean identity is very strongly tied to language use.<sup>4</sup> In addition, although Korean American identity has been examined through many different lenses, including that of heritage language maintenance,<sup>5</sup> the focus is rarely on Korean Americans' use of English. Next, I discuss the process of *enregisterment*, or how language varieties are identified in cultural discourse and rise to the level of consciousness to become "real." This process cannot be tracked in real time, but I use metalinguistic commentary to analyze how individuals conceptualize KAE and

identify patterns, specifically the patterns of disagreement over what KAE sounds like and disagreement over where it comes from. Finally, I connect these paradoxes to the racial ambiguity of Asian Americans<sup>6</sup> and complex relationships they have with language, culture, and hybrid identity.

### Metalinguistic commentary and enregisterment

In sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology, metalinguistic commentary refers to what people say and think about the linguistic practices of themselves and others. Analysis of metalinguistic commentary<sup>7</sup> is used in many areas of linguistics, including variationist sociolinguistics, sociocultural linguistics, dialectology, folk linguistics, and discourse analysis.<sup>8</sup> Metalinguistic commentary is an important source of knowledge when applied to the theorization of linguistic stereotypes. Asif Agha first discussed “metapragmatic narratives” in the context of speakers of Lhasa Tibetan who were asked to describe the appropriate uses of honorific language.<sup>9</sup> When speakers invoked the pragmatic “dos and don’ts” of honorific language, they created or reified stereotyped social personae, “employing language to motivate differences in social identity.”<sup>10</sup> For example, one speaker’s insistence that only “pure” speakers of Lhasa Tibetan would use a specific type of honorific in a specific social situation is not an empirical fact about the pragmatics of the language, but rather a speech act that creates a boundary between the person who believes in notions of linguistic purity and some other who fails to meet this standard.

Once a speaker stereotype has been created, it has the potential to solidify into a semiotic resource that is used or manipulated for the purpose of classifying the speakers themselves, not just the language that they speak. Michael Silverstein calls this phenomenon “orders of indexicality”<sup>11</sup>: a base-order sociolinguistic variable, such as variance in the use of honorifics or the pronunciation of a certain word, is first linked to a group of speakers with very basic demographic delineation (e.g., residents of a geographic region). When this linkage is picked up by listeners and given a metapragmatic interpretation, it then becomes a first-order indexical, and eventually a stereotype. The variance in speech, noted previously as a marker of membership in an inert group, becomes associated with some perceived *characteristic* of said group: residents of that region are now “wrong” for using a certain pronunciation, and speakers who employ that pronunciation are “wrong” regardless of where they are from.

This process is called “enregisterment,” which Barbara Johnstone calls a multi-place predicate: some linguistic form *is enregistered* by some agent in terms of a specific ideology, as the result of some action that calls attention to the form or the enregisterment itself, and all because of the nature of metapragmatic practices.<sup>12</sup> Enregisterment is itself impermanent: indexical associations in language are always in flux, growing and shrinking as people align themselves toward or away from the social personae they implicate.<sup>13</sup> In addition, variance from “the norm” is subjective: what is considered saliently different depends entirely on who is doing the consideration. Thus, the enregisterment of the speech of less visible, minoritized groups will have a smaller social life than the enregisterment of the speech of very visible, majority groups and of the groups that these visible groups pay the most attention to.<sup>14</sup>

## Racialization of Asian Americans

Korean Americans, who exemplify many of the effects of marginalization felt by Asian Americans as a whole,<sup>15</sup> are one such “less visible” group. Historically, Asian Americans have been subjected to racial triangulation (i.e., positioned as neither Black nor white, and operating at odds with this hegemonic dichotomy) and relegated to a liminal space in American cultural discourse.<sup>16</sup> Cathy Park Hong calls it a racial purgatory: Asian Americans are “neither white enough nor [B]lack enough, unmentioned in most conversations about racial identity.”<sup>17</sup> The use of the “Asian American” label itself in place of “Oriental,” followed by specific ethnic denominations (e.g., “Chinese American”), was an activist-led conversion of out-group-prescribed labels in response.<sup>18</sup> Asian Americans are necessarily a heterogeneous group, and it is valuable to maintain a dual perspective, pushing against discursive forces that attempt to flatten the variation in culture in Asian America, yet simultaneously conceiving of Asian American culture as unified in the way its own unsettled existence disrupts narratives of dominance and minority in North America.

However, the perspectives on Asian Americans in sociolinguistic literature remain oversimplified: often treated as “forever foreigners,”<sup>19</sup> their theoretical contributions kept within the realm of accent studies (as second-language speakers of English), or ignored in favor of studying only white or Black speakers. *The Atlas of North American English*, for example, discusses regional dialects absent racial identity, except in the chapters that are dedicated to African American English and Chicano English.<sup>20</sup> While speakers of any race can and do speak with regional accents, the lack of acknowledgment of a white ethnolect signifies that white speech is unmarked or “standard.” The absence of any mention of Asian-specific patterns or varieties reflects a clear gap in the literature. Sometimes, Asian American speakers are considered statistically non-differentiable from white speakers. For example, one early variationist study that examined the speech pattern known as the California Vowel Shift included data from two Asian Americans and twenty Anglo Americans,<sup>21</sup> but had neither a discussion of whether the two Asian Americans demonstrated any differences from the Anglo Americans, nor an explanation for why they may have patterned the same. A more recent study demonstrated how a young professional used the California Vowel Shift to represent multiple personae in different social contexts.<sup>22</sup> Although the subject of the case study was Asian American, there was no discussion of the impact race or ethnicity may have had on his speech, only comparisons with “surfer dudes and Valley Girls,” the stereotypical white faces of California English. Assuming *a priori* that Asian American speech is no different from white speech and ignoring it altogether are two sides of the same coin of erasure.

## Korean American language and identity

Although Korean Americans have been making space for themselves in the United States for over a century, the rise of modern Korean American identity began only a few generations ago, after the United States government lifted discriminatory bans against Asian immigration in 1965. An estimated 500,000 Korean Americans were born in the United States, many of whom grew up feeling “in between” two languages, two cultures, and two identities. The nature of Korean American identity has been theorized in many ways: as a hybrid identity, a transnational identity, and a conflicted identity characterized by an

ethnic bind.<sup>23</sup> It has been analyzed through the lens of generational difference, educational attainment, family formation, and Evangelical Christian culture.<sup>24</sup> With regards to language, a wealth of scholarship exists on the acquisition and maintenance of Korean as a heritage language,<sup>25</sup> but relatively scarce, in comparison, is scholarship on Korean Americans' perspectives on English.<sup>26</sup>

Research on American English as it is spoken by minoritized ethnic groups tends to focus on what makes these ethnolects – or ethnic varieties – distinct and identifiable by the out-group. African American English and Chicano English have been studied extensively,<sup>27</sup> but Asian American English has not. Even an early investigation of Korean American speech focused on the Korean Americans' use of African American Vernacular English, rather than any features that were uniquely Korean American.<sup>28</sup> We lack a complete theorization of “Asian American English,” if it exists at all. Angela Reyes and Adrienne Lo write, “efforts to find a variety of ethnically or racially distinctive [Asian Pacific American] English have generally been unsuccessful . . . . The forms of English spoken by [Asian Pacific Americans] are often not recognizable as indexing a particular ethnic or racial group.”<sup>29</sup> That said, some recent work in variationist sociolinguistics<sup>30</sup> provides evidence that the recognition of Asian American English – specifically KAE – is possible. One study describes the phonetics of KAE and distinguishes these patterns from Korean-accented English, but falls short of identifying a specifically Korean American pattern of speech.<sup>31</sup> Another looks at a specific vowel variable in the speech of Korean Americans from New Jersey and notes patterns that align with both local, New York-influenced norms as well as general American norms.<sup>32</sup> On the other hand, Korean Americans in Texas may resist the local norm, as measured by their pronunciation of specific vowels; those with a stronger orientation toward Korean community and culture were more likely to deviate from the norm and produce speech that may partly index their ethnic identity.<sup>33</sup> Of course, different Korean American communities will vary in the patterns that may distinguish them from others, and individuals within these communities will also fall along a spectrum.

In reviewing this literature on Korean American sociolinguistic variation, one must understand that some research treats ethnicity as a categorical variable, looking for cut-and-dry differences between one ethnicity and another. We can interrogate this approach: because ethnicity was historically designed and implemented along axes of power and exclusion in Western societies, modern linguistic research that deals with ethnicity may unintentionally prop up false assumptions about language and linguistic diversity.<sup>34</sup> In this paper, I thus focus on the language ideologies produced by the racialized subjects themselves and, despite giving the variety in question a name (“Korean American English”), I try to avoid contributing to researcher-induced homogenizing discourse<sup>35</sup> that essentializes the Korean American experience.

I aim to show that Korean Americans conceptualize a specific kind of language patterning that is part of a broadly envisioned Korean American identity, but that the specifics of this pattern and its relationship to identity are hard to grasp, or not quite there, both diaphanous and indescribable. This idea has its roots in racial ambiguity, the idea that Asian Americans are indeterminate and thus become a locus for cultural anxiety both within and beyond their own community. Jennifer Ho argues that ambiguity is “the only truly productive lens through which to view race because race itself is so slippery.”<sup>36</sup> I also draw from previous discussions of ethnic ambivalence in the Korean American community. M. Agnes Kang and Adrienne Lo show that the meaning of the terms “Korean” and “Koreanized” (as

well as “Americanized”), when used as categorical descriptors, are unstable and discourse-dependent.<sup>37</sup> I argue that language is also a slippery object, and variation within language even more so. Not only is identity construction protean, the words we use to build identity keep changing, too.

## Methods and findings

The data come from the expertise and personal experience of forty bilingual monoracial Korean Americans of varying ages and generational status,<sup>38</sup> mostly raised in California with a few exceptions. They participated in semi-structured interviews conducted in 2018–2019, which included questions that targeted individual attitudes toward language and identity:

“How would you describe the relationship between your ethnicity and your language use?”

“Do you feel like yourself when you are speaking Korean? English?”

“What does a Korean/Korean American accent sound like?”

Interview answers were analyzed qualitatively and organized into three main themes: the importance of being able to speak the Korean language, the sounds of the “Korean American accent,” and its origin. Each theme is supported with excerpts from the interviews, transcribed in plain English, including speech disfluencies, pauses, and filler words.<sup>39</sup> Pseudonyms are used for confidentiality.

### *Korean Americans and the Korean language*

First, there were a few points that the Korean American interviewees agreed on with respect to the formation of Korean American ethnolinguistic identity. For example, all the second-generation Korean Americans stated that they were more fluent or comfortable using English than Korean. Many believed that their ability to speak Korean was strongly tied to their cultural identity, which concurs with past research.<sup>40</sup> For Johnny, a 24-year-old second-generation Korean American born and raised in Los Angeles County, knowledge of the Korean language has been used as an explicit litmus test. He explained, “With Koreans, it’s like, ‘How Korean are you? Let me hear you speak’.” This is a prime example of Kang and Lo’s *discourse of agency*, a discourse that links Korean American identity to an individual’s behavior or practices. In other words, if you are Korean, you (must) speak Korean. This principle is often the result of parental influence, however, as Johnny explained:

**Johnny:** My mom used to tell me [. . .] other Korean people, they’re gonna look down on you if you look Korean but can’t speak it, so they’re like, don’t make a fool out of yourself, like, *yok mekcima* [“don’t bring shame”].

However, while Korean language ability might be important personally, there was more leeway given to *other* Korean Americans. Eric, a 22-year-old Korean American born in Los Angeles, explained that he identifies as Korean simply because his entire family is Korean, but when he goes back to Korea to visit, he realizes that he needs to speak the language to communicate with his family. “It’s hard to embrace the culture without knowing the

language,” he said, although he does believe that it is possible to identify with Korean culture even if one does not speak Korean. This, then, is an example of the alternative *discourse of dispositions*, a reflection of the (perceived) connectedness between Korean identity and an individual’s beliefs and values, which are considered inherent and unchangeable.

The tension between these two discourses can be strong. Sarah is a 32-year-old Korean American who was born to working class immigrant parents and raised in and around Koreatown, Los Angeles. She spent four years on the east coast for university, then relocated to Seoul, South Korea for two years. Sarah completely dissented from the idea that Korean identity is inextricably linked to Korean language use. “I feel like myself when I speak in Korean,” she said, “but I think it’s a different self.” She explained that if she were to lose all her Korean speaking ability, she would feel like she’s losing a part of herself, but at the same time, disagreed that being Korean necessarily means you must speak the language. Rather, she said, “it’s more of an individual decision.” There are ways to identify as Korean that depend less on linguistic ability, including certain ways of dressing, having public school and Korean church as a nexus of social life, and having relationships with other Korean people. Her Korean identity is tied in part to her language use, but she rejects the notion that it *must* be so for other Korean Americans. Kelsey, a 31-year-old second-generation Korean American from Orange County, would agree.

**Author:** Do people who are Korean need to speak Korean?

**Kelsey:** Oh, um, I mean personally, I think- I think that’s bullshit. [...] I mean, language is obviously an important marker of identity, but, um, I don’t see the need to be, like, prescriptivist about it. I’m not here to impose, like, any rules about how people should express themselves.

Korean Americans today have more variable opinions about the importance of speaking Korean, from being an integral part of their heritage to being a beneficial – but not crucial – skill for personal development. As diversity within the Korean American community and broader Korean diaspora grows, and as it becomes more inclusive of Koreans who may not speak Korean, such as transnational adoptees or third generation Korean Americans, it is likely that use of the Korean language as a metric for gauging Korean identity in the diaspora will diminish. Is it possible for use of English, or a specific type of ethnically-marked English, to replace it? Some interviewees were eager to discuss what they called “K-town English” and other monikers; others were quick to identify those in their community who “speak [English] like white people” and what they sounded like. In the next section, I describe the indescribability of Korean Americans’ English.

### *Indescribable sounds*

When asked what a Korean American voice sounds like (in any language), most interviewees went for a dichotomous explanation, defining “Korean voices” and “American voices” and placing “Korean American voices” at odds with or in the middle of them. Interviewees were very quick to describe the hallmarks of L1 Korean-accented English<sup>41</sup>: confusion of /l/ and /r/, merger of the vowels in *peach* and *pitch*, and misuse of the articles *the* and *a*. They considered these to be stereotypes of their immigrant parents’ speech in

English, or of “FOBs.”<sup>42</sup> But all the interviewees considered themselves to be dominant in English or equally proficient in English and Korean, and many made comments about their own use of English that reflected the idea that it was differentiable from “the norm.” Harry brought up what he called “a strange Korean American accent.” He and many others stated that there was a way of speaking English that marked someone as sounding specifically American-born Korean and not first-generation immigrant, even though they could rarely pinpoint exactly what it entailed. Here are just two examples:

**Melanie:** When [Korean Americans] speak English, their accent is . . . sorry, I can’t describe it. I could hear it in my head, but I can’t describe it.

**Catherine:** There’s a certain way of talking; I can’t really quite put my finger on it.

Descriptors such as “subtle,” “delicate,” and “slight difference” were common among interviewees. When asked to elaborate, some settled on describing vowels and consonant sounds. Eric called the accent “inexplicable” but went on to describe Korean American enunciation as “blocky,” while Sungwoo, a 1.5-generation Korean American, described it as having “more edges,” compared to “white English, [which] feels more circle-like, rounded,” and having a better “flow.” In terms of vowels, Kelsey described Korean Americans’ English as being “a little bit flatter,” in contrast to “American-style English” that has more shape to its vowels. In linguistic anthropology, these kinds of descriptors are called “qualia”: feelings and sensations that are associated with aspects of sociocultural life (as opposed to literal physical sensations) and thus positively or negatively valenced.<sup>43</sup> The use of qualia is central to assigning people to social categories that are assumed to preexist, as demonstrated by Reyes’s analysis of Philippine urban elites and the qualia of “rough” or “gentle” which, when applied to their speech, body movements, or behavior, are used to distinguish “real” from “fake” members of the social group.<sup>44</sup>

Importantly, the qualia assigned to Korean American speech by Korean Americans have contradictory natures. KAE is described in terms of softness (“subtle,” “smooth”) or fragility (“delicate”), but also in terms of hardness (“blocky,” “boxy,” “more edges”). The angularity was sometimes associated with the harsher consonants of the Korean language, and blockiness with the syllable blocks of the Korean writing system. But “white American English” was also described with equally contradictory qualia: “smooth,” “circular,” “rounded,” but also “strong and straightforward,” in particular American English /r/. In comparison, “Korean Americans are a little bit softer [in their /r/],” said Yuna, a 1.5-generation Korean American, “they don’t go as deep in the curve.” Qualia serve as a bridge to connect linguistic stereotypes to human stereotypes, but in the case of Korean American speech, there are contradictory or competing types being formed. Sometimes, there was hardly a type being formed at all. Interviewees who attempted to describe suprasegmental aspects of speech, such as prosody, came up short:

**Adrian:** I don’t wanna say it’s an accent, cause it’s not really an accent. It’s more like an intonation, I guess, I don’t know . . . Something about the way they talk I can just tell, like, they’re Korean.

**Winston:** I think there’s a lot of inflections in our speech that typical English speakers don’t have, and I think we do it in a very similar way.



Use of words such as “intonation” and “inflection” indicates that Korean Americans also perceive the Korean American speech style as more than just marked vowels and consonants. There were, once again, contradictions: KAE was described by one interviewee as “more like singing” than English, but white English was described as “more melodic” by another. When pressed for more detail, few interviewees were able to define what the intonational pattern was, or what they even meant by words like “inflection.” Notably, Adrian’s and Winston’s descriptions above are loaded with hedges (“I don’t know,” “I can just tell,” “I feel like,” “I think”), a telling indication of the indescribability of KAE.

### *Indescribable origins*

The second indescribable element in the interviews arose somewhat indirectly, as the interviewees struggled to justify not just what KAE is, but *why* it is, or where it came from. There was lots of contradiction and vagueness regarding which factors contribute to whether any given Korean American speaker of English has the “accent”. But the narratives that arose in the interviewees’ attempts to explain fell broadly into three categories: the influence of spoken Korean on one’s English, the influence of a regional dialect, and the influence of being around Korean Americans.

### *Influence of spoken Korean*

While interviewees agreed that recent immigrants and older immigrants would speak English with strong phonological and prosodic influence from their first language of Korean, only a handful thought that second-generation Korean Americans would demonstrate this transfer effect of bilingualism.

**Catherine:** Like, we’ll kinda slur some of our words, I think, the way that we say things in English. I think it’s influenced by our inflection and the way that we speak in Korean. You know, I can feel some of that, um, the rhythm of my Korean language, you know, inflecting- not inflecting, but, you know, influencing, the way that my English flows.

Another interviewee focused on specific lexical items that could be influenced by Korean in a small way.

**Winston:** Some of the English words start to sometimes adapt, like [...] if I were to say *ice cream* in English, I would say “*ice cream*”, but in Korean, I would say “*aisu khulim*.” But then I think there comes this hybrid, where the English word starts to adapt a little bit of that Korean way of saying it, so it’s not quite the English way; it’s not the Korean way; but it’s, like, kind of this hybrid, closer to the English side.”

Even though many Korean Americans view their knowledge or use of the Korean language to be an important part of their personal cultural identity, again, only a few interviewees thought spoken Korean was a strong influencer of Korean American English.

### *Influence of a regional pattern*

Yuri, a second-generation Korean American who grew up on the east coast of the United States, rejects the linguistic influence explanation in favor of something more broadly regional. She reasoned that KAE was more generally geographical, a kind of combination of a Korean accent and a “west coast accent.” Many interviewees, particularly those in Southern California, drew connections between the way Korean Americans speak and

broader regional vocal stereotypes that exist in popular discourse, including the “Valley Girl” persona. According to Jennifer, a second-generation Korean American who was born in Los Angeles Koreatown and has lived in Southern California for her entire life, her Asian American peers told her, when she went to college, that she had “like a mixture of Korean, English, and then a Valley Girl accent.” Two other interviewees, both women who grew up in Los Angeles, self-identified as having “the Valley Girl accent” and having had it pointed out to them in their adulthood. It is worth mentioning that “the Valley” in geographic terms refers to the San Fernando Valley, which is north of Los Angeles, but that the boundaries of the Valley Girl persona extend far further, easily encompassing all of Southern California and, for some, even Northern California.<sup>45</sup> Yet Jennifer associated it with the Korean Americans who are specifically from Koreatown.

**Jennifer:** A lot of Korean American girls speak like that in Koreatown, yeah . . . and I still hear it a lot when I go out nowadays. [ . . . ]

**Author:** Where do you think that came from, cause, like, Koreatown is not near the Valley?

**Jennifer:** It’s not, but I think Koreatown just made it its own sort of accent.

Jennifer followed this declaration with several demonstrations of the way Korean American girls would raise their pitch at the ends of their sentences, known as uptalk,<sup>46</sup> also calling it “whinier” speech. When she described Korean American men from Koreatown, however, there was no mention of the Valley Girl persona. Instead, Koreatown men are still distinguishable as Korean, but it has more to do with “word choices” and, importantly, is “completely different from how a OC [Orange County] Korean American talks.” Catherine agreed, saying she can tell if she’s speaking to someone who’s Korean “if they’re from the Valley, if they’re from Orange County, if they’re from L.A., or if they’re, like, a K-town Korean.” Koreans from the Valley are most likely to use uptalk, while Koreans from K-town “will definitely throw in a lot of Korean when they speak to you in English,” a practice known as code-switching.

### *Influence of Korean interlocutors*

The third idea brought up in interviews is that simply being around more Korean Americans makes one more likely to speak with the “Korean American accent.” This is a characteristic of a potential ethnolect: rather than stemming solely from influence of a heritage language, it is acquired from co-ethnics who already have it, and may be used – consciously or not – as a reflection of ethnic identity, as a display of ethnic solidarity, or as a means of negotiating ethnic identity in discourse. The first indication of this was that the interviewees agreed that Korean Americans they knew who did not grow up surrounded by Korean people did not have any trace of the accent. This includes Korean American transnational adoptees or Korean Americans who grew up in areas without large Korean communities. Catherine explained, “When I’ve met Koreans who grew up, like, in Ohio or Tennessee, in areas where, like, they were one of the only Korean families . . . they do sound very white, at least to me.” Another interviewee declared that the Korean Americans he knew who were adopted by white parents had no trace of KAE at all. However, even Koreans in Southern California might not speak with the Korean American “accent,” depending on their social network.

**Sungwoo:** I have one friend [who has] a lot of white friends, um . . . And so her English sounds different than a second gen Korean. Like, I could tell . . .

**Author:** It sounds white?

**Sungwoo:** Yeah.

Jessica, a second-generation Korean American who grew up in Glendale (a suburb of Los Angeles) but also spent several years outside of California, noted that her friends have said that she “speak[s] English like a white girl.” Her justification involved the ethnic makeup of her childhood social network:

**Jessica:** I wanna say it’s because I was exposed to more Korean Americans later in life, um, and as well as the culture, I think I was raised, uh, with more Caucasian peers and non-Korean peers for at least, like, at least my elementary phase. So that could be it; maybe I got started young.

The idea that an individual’s speech is heavily influenced by their peers and social networks in childhood is well supported in the sociolinguistic literature, though it would be erroneous to conclude that a person’s accent is set for life after a certain age. Indeed, the same individual will vary their own speech in different social situations. Those who acknowledged having a Korean American accent most often referenced it in the context of speaking with other Korean Americans. Kelsey said she hears it “when it’s Korean Americans speaking English in a Korean American setting: at a church, for example.” Winston also brought up the church context:

**Winston:** People [will] tell me, like, “Hey, [Winston], you kind of have an accent.” And when I listen to myself, I do hear it, and it’s very similar to the way a lot of my Korean American friends speak, um . . . and I hear the most when I’m at a Korean American church, because everyone’s just Korean American, right? So whenever people speak English, there’s a very, uh, specific way that we speak English.

Kenny, a 29-year-old Korean American born in Koreatown and raised in nearby La Crescenta, referenced a more colorful name of dubious origin: “sticky tongue”.

**Kenny:** Being in an Asian family, we still have that Asian sticky tongue.

**Author:** S- Asian . . . ?

**Kenny:** [. . .] My friend had a white girl[friend] that called it that . . .

**Author:** Sticky tongue? What does that mean?

**Kenny:** Uh, it’s that we have that slightly Asian accent, she called it sticky tongue, um . . . now that I think about it, I’m like, that’s pretty racist [. . .] If you’re Korean American and [. . .] you only hang out with white people for a few months, it goes away for the most part, um, and then it comes back.

**Author:** Interesting.

**Kenny:** So I had a friend – she would go to Westmont College in Santa Barbara – it would go away, and then if she came home for a weekend, it would come back [. . .] cause you start talking like the people around you.

Harry also made an astute observation that people can and do change the way that they speak depending on who is listening and which parties they intend to impress or gain favor

with. He explained that sometimes, “if I’m with a bunch of white people, I would sort of like to [put on an] affect that I was born here, and that I was privileged with a life in America.” He went on to say that he does almost the opposite with his Korean peers: “Sometimes, I use [Korean American] English in the way that I do so I can sort of have social capital.” Thus, we see many instances of the interviewees’ metalinguistic awareness that Korean American English is not an unchangeable property that is simply possessed by some and not others, but rather a mutable resource, drawn from many social influences and at times wielded as a tool to navigate and negotiate racial identity and belonging.

### Indexing and enregisterment of Korean American English

Which came first, the sound or the stereotype? Paul Foulkes and Jennifer Hay explain that an individual’s phonetic repertoire is shaped through interaction and conversation, as sounds are stored in memory along with all their social indices.<sup>47</sup> With enough repetition and reinforcement, these mental representations expand and become enregistered as a type. But this process is necessarily influenced by language ideologies, including preconceived notions of who is “expected” to speak in a marked way. Miyako Inoue describes the concept of the “listening subject,” who in linguistic and anthropological research has historically been a white male intellectual.<sup>48</sup> The expectations that are held by the typical listening subject have fundamentally shaped what researchers and laypeople alike consider to be normative or marked speech, and this artifact of scientific history bleeds into casual socio-linguistic discourse. Jonathan Rosa and Nelson Flores add that racialized listening subjects are not immune to linguistic ideologies that otherize their own language use.<sup>49</sup> In other words, it is not necessarily the case that Korean Americans speak English a certain way, and that the features of their speech are then noticed by objective listeners. Just as often, a listener’s racialized or ideologized perception of speech comes first, and the process of enregisterment eventually creates the conditions for others to speak in that manner.

In the narrative Winston provided above, he noted that, *first*, people told him that he “has an accent.” After that, he listened to himself and was “able” to hear it. It became incumbent on him to explain where that accent came from, whether the original perceiver heard a marked phonetic feature or was influenced by an expectation that he would speak differently.<sup>50</sup> That justification became part of the narrative of enregisterment. Similarly, Jennifer, who described the influence of the Valley Girl accent on KAE, first explained what her other Korean and Asian American peers pointed out to her (“it’s not like an accent that you hear from people directly from Korea, but you can tell [I’m] Asian”), then realized that after that moment, she began to hear it, as well.

If KAE has been enregistered in this manner, then what does the “accent” actually index? The most thorough explanation came from Sarah, who identified it as specific to the well-known Koreatown of Los Angeles, as well as to any social context with a high concentration of Korean Americans (thus relieving it of a strictly geographic locus). In these unique, pseudo-enclaved Korean American communities, social trends such as fashion go together with certain vocal characteristics, both of which similarly index a specific Korean American identity.

**Sarah:** So, growing up in, uh, Koreatown, L.A., there’s like a specific idea of, like, what that was growing up [...] Nowadays, I would call it, like, a Korean American accent. There were, like,

certain ways people dressed, there were certain hobbies that people had, like a lot of Korean American, like, you know, um, kids were, like, friends with each other, right? And, like, it was a whole, like, public school-attending, like, Christian church-attending, like, crowd.

Sarah herself admitted, “I think my English sounds really ‘L.A.’ cause I have, totally have, Valley Girl. I have it. It’s not going away.” But at an early age, she had a memorable exchange with a Korean American schoolmate who pointed out to her that her speech was distinctly *not* Korean American.

**Sarah:** She used to, like, make me feel bad for, like, not speaking good enough Korean, but I think, like, she would be, like, “Oh you sound really white,” right? So it wasn’t that my Korean was bad, it was that I sounded very white when I talked in English, and I think that was because I didn’t have, like, the Korean American lisp.

When pressed to define this notion of a “lisp,” which, like Kenny’s “sticky tongue,” had been mentioned unprompted, Sarah explained, “I don’t even know what you call it; it’s not a lisp, it’s like an intonation . . . I really can’t describe it. I can’t even do [or imitate] it. Maybe, like, it’s, it’s . . . like having, like, a very, very light Korean intonation when you’re talking in English. I can identify it if I hear it; I can’t reproduce it.” Again, we see the indescribable nature of Korean American speech, although Sarah is completely certain as to who speaks it. “I think it’s people who are, like, exposed to a lot of Korean media. They have a lot of Korean friends,” she said, continuing, “It’s also contextual, I think, like, who they’re talking to. A lot of the church people had it. They were sort of, like, born and raised in K-town, had stayed there, had gone to school there, like, live there right now.”

On the other hand, some interviewees were adamant that they did not have a Korean American accent. Two second-generation Korean Americans, both raised in Los Angeles, recalled that they had been told they had accents, but personally disagreed. Cassie directly blamed a kind of systemic racial bias for this:

**Cassie:** Sorry if I’m not politically correct, but I know white people always think that I have an accent, but, like, other, you know, like Chinese Americans or Korean Americans, they don’t think that I have an accent.

Josephina elaborated, touching again on the power of the listening subject and racialized expectations of speech:

**Josephina:** When people say – not even that my English is good – it’s like, “You have a particular accent,” that is almost always from, like, white people. [...] Um, I think it’s just that whole perpetual foreigner thing with Asians [...] I think it’s the whole, you know, hallucinating the accents, basically, um, they perceive an accent where maybe there isn’t one.

There was generally a strong association of this accent with being Korean American and spending significant amounts of time with other Korean Americans, but not necessarily with speaking or hearing the Korean language or adopting characteristics of Southern California English. Several interviewees compared Korean American speech to varieties of English that are considered ethnolects.

**Jessica:** If I can compare it, I have Hispanic friends who are born here, and their first language is English, but there’s something in the way that they speak that I can even tell is very, like, Mexican American or Salvadoran American.

**Kenny:** You know, like, the regional dialects, and how like Black people, they have to change it, so they say Black people have two ways, two languages: there's like the Black vernacular English and then "interview talk"? So it's that same idea. We can – we can hide it.

Although interviewees tried their best to stay away from explicit judgment of the accents or vocal characteristics that they used to identify other Korean Americans by their speech, most of them felt strongly about their ability to use a "K-dar."

**Stephanie:** I have, like, this Korean radar, my husband calls it, so if I identify that someone is possibly Korean and speaking in English but with an accent, I might just ask them, like, "Oh, are you Korean?"

**Catherine:** I know sometimes I don't present as looking Korean, but as soon as I open my mouth, most people can tell I'm Korean. Even the way we say the word Korean: it's a little different.

Johnstone reminds us that it is crucially in metapragmatic exchanges such as these, when people intentionally and explicitly bring up the association they have made between a speech act and an identity, that enregisterment takes place. In other words, the existence of the very idea of a "K-dar" means that Korean American English has already been enregistered.

## Discussion

When it comes to Korean American English, subjectivity reigns. The interviewees converged on what is ostensibly the same sociolinguistic object, but what that object is exactly, where it comes from, and even who wields it, turned out to be a matter of both personal experience and external language ideologies that circulate through Korean American and Asian American communities. Korean Americans identified a voice, or a set of vocal characteristics, which they associated with being a second-generation Korean American who had natively acquired English, but they cited different sources: the influence of the Korean language on English pronunciation, the influence of regional sound patterns in Southern California English, and the influence of other Korean Americans who speak the same way.

Unlike the southern American "drawl," which is easily conceptualized by the in-group and out-group alike to have specific acoustic characteristics such as longer and shifted vowels, in addition to being a core part of many imitable personae,<sup>51</sup> Korean American speech is so far only recognizable in the broadest of terms. Lacking the phonetic specificity of better-known dialects, it is described with contradictory qualia such as "soft"/"edged," "flat"/"rounded," and often, overall, as "strange." It is also possible that the Korean American listening subject is influenced by expectations of others' speech and hears, at times, traces of an accent that is not really "there." The indescribability of KAE points to its faulty enregisterment as an ethnic variety. This is in stark contrast, for example, to African Americans' broad and confident understanding of African American English(es) and the clear connections between the use of this variety and the performance, construction, and negotiation of African American identity.

Whether they call it an accent, a special intonation, or a "lisp," Korean Americans mostly associate this pattern of English with a specific type of community member. If you grew up

in a Korean “bubble,” whether it is a tight-knit Koreatown neighborhood or a suburban Korean enclave in Orange County, you are expected to have it. If you are heavily involved in the Korean American Protestant church community, you are expected to have it. It is marked, and directly contrasted with both Korean-accented English and (“unmarked”) white English, although some interviewees also conflated it with the stereotypical white Valley Girl accent. Thus resurfaces the “slipperiness” of categories when it comes to self-ascription and other-imposition of linguistic labels. Who speaks Korean American English? Is Korean American speech not simply any and all speech used by Korean Americans? This recalls the fundamental slipperiness of racial and ethnic categories: who is Korean American? To what degree is this category created by those to whom the label is applied, versus conferred or placed upon them by systems that employ categorization to maintain a power hierarchy? Cathy Park Hong crystallizes the anxiety of slipperiness well: “The writer Jeff Chang writes that ‘I want to love us’ but he says that he can’t bring himself to do that because he doesn’t know who ‘us’ is. I share that uncertainty. Who is us? What is us?”<sup>52</sup>

Part of Asian American anxiety stems from myriad issues surrounding language ownership. Perhaps Korean Americans, long held responsible for being fluent in Korean and simultaneously painted with the brush of perpetual foreignness, have a collective hesitation to claim the English language as something they can own and change. Not only must they adapt to cultural pressures to assimilate their speech to a white standard to gain access to certain institutions,<sup>53</sup> even if they do recognize the uniqueness of a new speech pattern, they usually lack the tools to articulate what it is. When I discussed the phonetic features of KAE with a Korean American colleague, she responded with an air of relief and vindication. “I feel so validated,” she said, “knowing that what I heard when I was a kid was *real*. I wasn’t just hearing things.” Beyond attempts to pin down these phonetic features, other viable avenues for future research include analyzing potential generational differences in meta-linguistic commentary,<sup>54</sup> as well as introducing the perspectives of Korean Americans who were not represented in this study, including Korean adoptees, multiracial Korean Americans, and Korean Americans who had limited contact with larger Korean communities while growing up.<sup>55</sup>

Korean American English is undefinable, yet 100% identifiable. This, indeed, is a synecdoche of the impact that lacking conceptual tools to discuss race and ethnicity has on Asian American racial formation beyond the linguistic realm. Asian Americans, too, are increasingly difficult to define. The labels used through most of our history have never fit perfectly and thus clearly demonstrate the social construction of race and ethnicity. As a linguist and an interdisciplinary scholar, I believe that more attention must be paid to speech, language, identity construction among Asian Americans, several generations of whom have acquired and passed on languages while scholars continue to uncover the complexities and nuances of how language affects Asian American identity, with its multiple cultural influences. Beyond legitimizing accented English and dropping pins on new language varieties, Asian American sociolinguistics is just beginning a crucial new chapter that explores the linguistic elements of race and racialization.

## Notes

1. Braj B. Kachru, *Asian Englishes: Beyond the Canon*, vol. 1 (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2005).

2. Angela Reyes, "The voicing of Asian American figures," in *Raciolinguistics: How language shapes our ideas about race*, eds. H. Samy Alim, John R. Rickford, and Arnetha F. Ball (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016): 309–26.
3. Lisa J. Green, *African American English: A Linguistic Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
4. Steve K. Lee, "The significance of language and cultural education on secondary achievement: A survey of Chinese-American and Korean-American students," *Bilingual Research Journal* 26, no. 2 (2002): 327–38. Similar ideologies have been found for transnational Korean families (Joseph Sung-Yul Park and Sohee Bae, "Language ideologies in educational migration: Korean *jogi yuhak* families in Singapore," *Linguistics and Education* 20, no. 4 [2009]: 366–77) and Korean nationals (Gi-Wook Shin, *Ethnic nationalism in Korea: Genealogy, politics, and legacy* [Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006]).
5. Lucy Tse, "The Effects of Ethnic Identity Formation on Bilingual Maintenance and Development: An Analysis of Asian American Narratives," *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 3, no. 3 (2000): 185–200.
6. Jennifer Ann Ho, *Racial Ambiguity in Asian American Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015).
7. Antonella Sorace, "Metalinguistic knowledge and language use in acquisition-poor environments," *Applied Linguistics* 6, no. 3 (1985): 239–54; Karen Roehr, "Metalinguistic knowledge and language ability in university-level L2 learners," *Applied Linguistics* 29, no. 2 (2008): 173–99. Metalinguistic commentary should not be confused with the term "metalinguistic knowledge," used in the field of applied linguistics to refer mainly to the knowledge that language users have about the internal grammar (or structure) of a language they speak or are attempting to learn, often contrasting the relatively poor metalinguistic knowledge and high proficiency of native speakers with the relatively advanced metalinguistic knowledge (due to explicit instruction) and lower proficiency of language learners.
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9. Asif Agha, "Stereotypes and registers of honorific language," *Language in Society* 27, no. 2 (1998): 151–93.
10. *Ibid.*, 168.
11. Michael Silverstein, "Indexical order and the dialectics of sociolinguistic life," *Language and Communication* 23, no. 3–4 (2003): 193–229.
12. Barbara Johnstone, "Enregisterment: How linguistic items become linked with ways of speaking," *Language and Linguistics Compass* 10, no. 11 (2016): 632–43.
13. Asif Agha, "Voice, footing, enregisterment," *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 15, no. 1 (2005): 38–59.
14. A brief example: most people have an "inherent" awareness of "how young women speak" (think vocal fry and uptalk and their associated personality traits), but not necessarily of "how middle-aged men speak." This has nothing to do with how young women speak and everything to do with who is noticing them and in which contexts.
15. Korean Americans are, in my opinion, relatively more socially visible than many other groups in the United States racialized as Asian, such as Hmong Americans or Sri Lankan Americans.
16. Claire Jean Kim, "The racial triangulation of Asian Americans," *Politics & Society* 27, no. 1 (1999): 105–38.



17. Cathy Park Hong, *Minor Feelings: An Asian American Reckoning* (New York: One World, 2020): 9.
18. Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996).
19. Mia Tuan, *Forever Foreigners or Honorary Whites?: The Asian Ethnic Experience Today* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998).
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21. Leanne Hinton, Birch Moonwomon, Sue Bremner, Herb Luthin, Mary Van Clay, Jean Lerner, and Hazel Corcoran, "It's not just the Valley Girls: A study of California English," *Annual Meeting of the Berkeley Linguistics Society*, vol. 13 (1987): 117–28.
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23. Stephanie L. Young, "Half and half: An (auto) ethnography of hybrid identities in a Korean American mother-daughter relationship," *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication* 2, no. 2 (2009): 139–67; Nadia Y. Kim, *Imperial Citizens: Koreans and Race from Seoul to L.A.* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008); Nazli Kibria, "College and Notions of 'Asian American': Second-Generation Chinese and Korean Americans Negotiate Race and Identity," *Amerasia Journal* 25, no. 1 (1999): 29–52; Nazli Kibria, "Race, ethnic options, and ethnic binds: Identity negotiations of second-generation Chinese and Korean Americans," *Sociological Perspectives* 43, no. 1 (2000): 77–95.
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26. M. Agnes Kang, "Constructing ethnic identity through discourse: Self-categorization among Korean American camp counselors," *Pragmatics* 14, no. 2–3 (2004): 217–33; Jinny K. Choi, "Identity and language: Korean speaking Korean, Korean-American speaking Korean and English?," *Language and Intercultural Communication* 15, no. 2 (2015): 240–66.
27. Green, *African American English*; Carmen Fought, *Chicano English in Context* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).
28. Elaine W. Chun, "The construction of white, black, and Korean American identities through African American Vernacular English," *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 11, no. 1 (2001): 52–64; Angela Reyes, "Appropriation of African American slang by Asian American youth," *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 9, no. 4 (2005): 509–32.
29. Angela Reyes and Adrienne Lo, *Beyond Yellow English* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009): 5.
30. Angela Reyes (p.c.) asks for a clarification of the different ways production and perception studies in variationist sociolinguistics conceive of the relationship between identity and language. True, production studies may make the presupposition that an ethnic identity is a unified, preexisting category (when indeed it is socially and discursively constructed), while perception studies may do the same, but also leave room to explicitly interrogate the influence of listeners' ideologies about said categories. However, studies in this tradition that use either or both methodologies are still able to take a post-structuralist view of ethnic identity (Jürgen Jaspers, "Problematizing ethnolects: Naming linguistic practices in an Antwerp secondary

- school,” *International Journal of Bilingualism* 12, no. 1–2 [2008]: 85–103); Kara Becker’s recent work on ethnolinguistic repertoire in New York City comes to mind as an example.
31. Rachel Elizabeth Schirra, “Attitudes Toward Korean-Accented and Korean American English” (PhD diss., University of Washington, 2012).
  32. Jinsok Lee, “The participation of a northern New Jersey Korean American community in local and national language variation,” *American Speech* 91, no. 3 (2016): 327–60.
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  34. Jonathan Rosa and Nelson Flores, “Unsettling race and language: Toward a raciolinguistic perspective,” *Language in Society* 46, no. 5 (2017): 621–47.
  35. Jaspers, “Problematizing ethnolects.”
  36. Ho, *Racial Ambiguity in Asian American Culture*, 4.
  37. M. Agnes Kang and Adrienne Lo, “Two ways of articulating heterogeneity in Korean American narratives of ethnic identity,” *Journal of Asian American Studies* 7, no. 2 (2004): 93–116.
  38. I define “second-generation” Korean Americans as those who were born in the United States to immigrant parents (who were the “first generation” to live in the United States) and grew up speaking and hearing Korean at home before acquiring English at school; 1.5-generation Korean Americans were born in South Korea but immigrated to the United States as children or adolescents.
  39. Ellipses within brackets indicate intervening speech containing unrelated content, and words within brackets indicate the author’s substitution of clarifying words.
  40. Eui-Young Yu, “Ethnic Identity and Community Involvement of Younger-Generation Korean Americans,” *Korean Studies: New Pacific Currents* 1 (1994): 263; Grace Cho, Kyung-Sook Cho, and Lucy Tse, “Why ethnic minorities want to develop their heritage language: The case of Korean-Americans,” *Language, Culture and Curriculum* 10, no. 2 (1997): 106–12; Lee, “The Korean language in America.”
  41. Schirra, *Attitudes Toward Korean-Accented and Korean American English*.
  42. “Fresh Off the Boat” immigrants, a slang term often brought up by Korean American interviewees but which I should note is perceived by some Asian Americans to be offensive.
  43. Lily Hope Chumley and Nicholas Harkness, “Introduction: Qualia,” *Anthropological Theory* 13, no. 1–2 (2013): 3–11.
  44. Angela Reyes, “Ontology of fake: Discerning the Philippine elite,” *Signs and Society* 5, no. S1 (2017): S100–27.
  45. Teresa Pratt and Annette D’Onofrio, “Jaw setting and the California Vowel Shift in parodic performance,” *Language in Society* 46, no. 3 (2017): 283; Leanne Hinton, “It’s not just the Valley Girls.”
  46. Paul Warren, *Uptalk: The Phenomenon of Rising Intonation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).
  47. Paul Foulkes and Jennifer B. Hay, “The Emergence of Sociophonetic Structure,” in *The Handbook of Language Emergence*, eds. Brian MacWhinney and William O’Grady (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell, 2015): 292.
  48. Miyako Inoue, *Vicarious Language: Gender and Linguistic Modernity in Japan*, vol. 11 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).
  49. Rosa and Flores, “Unsettling race and language,” 8.
  50. The curious reader may ask, “So, as a linguist, do *you* hear a Korean American accent in Winston’s voice?” This is a complex question, for all of the same reasons. I do hear features in Winston’s voice that, to my ears and with my social expectations, stand out to me as being Korean American: a monophthongized /oo/ vowel (as in *goat*), a stopped fricative /ð/ that causes *they* to sound more like *day*, and relatively high pitch rises at the ends of phrases (“uptalk”). But what I perceive cannot be separated from my prior knowledge and biases; what we require is an experimental paradigm that has many people, both Korean and non-Korean, anonymously listen to Winston’s voice and attempt the same perceptual identification.

51. Barbara Johnstone, “Southern speech with a Northern accent: Performance norms in an imitation,” *American Speech: A Quarterly of Linguistic Usage* 93, no. 3–4 (2018): 497–512.
52. Hong, *Minor Feelings*, 28.
53. Henry G. Widdowson, “The ownership of English,” *TESOL Quarterly* 28, no. 2 (1994): 377–89.
54. For example, Jamie Shinhee Lee has written about how marginalized elderly Korean women have a starkly different perspective of global English in South Korea than the rest of the population (Jamie Shinhee Lee, “Everywhere you go, you see English!': Elderly women's perspectives on globalization and English,” *Critical Inquiry in Language Studies* 13, no. 4 (2016): 319–50), as well as how the adoption of English differs for the parents' and children's generations in transnational Korean-Australian families (Jamie Shinhee Lee, “Sociolinguistics of Transnationalism and Issues of Language, Gender, and Generation: Korean Migrant Families in Australia,” in *Korean Englishes in Transnational Contexts*, eds. Christopher J. Jenks and Jerry Won Lee (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017): 23–51), illustrating the important intersectionality of generation and gender for language ideologies.
55. As indicated previously, these communities within the Korean American population have been analyzed through the lens of heritage language (i.e., Korean) learning and maintenance (e.g., Samantha Harris and Jin Sook Lee, “Korean-speaking spaces: heritage language learning and community access for mixed-race Korean Americans,” *International Journal of Multilingualism* [2021]: 1–29.; Sarah J. Shin, “Transforming culture and identity: Transnational adoptive families and heritage language learning,” *Language, Culture and Curriculum* 26, no. 2 [2013]: 161–78), but critical analyses of their perceptions of KAE are scarce.

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## Notes on contributor

*Andrew Cheng* is a linguist who investigates the social underpinnings of language and speech, including the perception of accents, the influence of race on linguistic ideologies, and language acquisition in bilingual families. He specializes in Asian American English, broadly defined. He is one of the organizers of the Korean Heritage Language Research Group at the University of California, Irvine.

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