

# Stance, style, and vocal mimicry

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## Abstract

This paper discusses the relationship between stance and mimicry by exploring the semiotic mechanisms by which speakers deploy indexical resources in mimicry of others. It argues that stance and mimicry must be seen as mediated through style. As a dialogic act of negotiating and reframing the meaning of style, mimicry opens up a space where the stylistic resources of the mimicked are juxtaposed with other semiotic forms, leading to subtle shifts in the interpretations of the original style. This point is illustrated through an analysis of two contrasting cases of vocal mimicry (commonly called *seongdaemosa*) on Korean television, both of which target a popular game show host, No Hyeonjeong, who is well known for her “refined female persona.” In these examples, the contrasting stances taken by the two performers lead to radically different interpretations of the same person, which underlines the fact that displays of stance are closely integrated into the performance of mimicry. Based on this analysis, the paper argues that detailed study of how stylistic resources are taken up in mimicry is necessary for a better understanding of its humorous effect.

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## 1. Introduction

Stance is a key topic for recent research in discourse, pragmatics, and sociolinguistics. While the notion of stance has commonly been treated as an attitudinal matter of the individual speaker, in more recent work stancetaking is conceptualized as a dialogic phenomenon, an intersubjective act through which speakers position themselves toward an entity or proposition and align themselves in relation to each other (Du Bois, 2007; Johnstone, 2009; Kärkkäinen, 2006; Lempert, 2008). In this sense, current understandings of stance highlight the interactional basis of social meaning—how meaning is inherently embedded within the dynamics of social interaction. In this paper, I illustrate this point by discussing the relationship between stance, the meaning of style (Eckert, 2004, 2008), and the discursive act of mimicry.

Mimicry is an instance of double voicing (Bakhtin, 1984), in which one appropriates the voice of another. Numerous phenomena that exemplify double voicing—including not only mimicry but mocking (Basso, 1979; Hill, 2001; Chun, 2009), parody (Ronkin and Karn, 1999; Scialfani, 2009; Chun and Walters, 2011), crossing (Rampton, 1995), and stylization (Barrett, 1999; Coupland, 2001)—are ideal sites for exploring the work of stancetaking. Stance is always implicated in double voicing, for the patterns of alignment or disalignment with the other's voice (uni-directional vs. vari-directional double voicing in Bakhtin's terms) constitute varying stances that the speaker may take. This is particularly so in cases of mimicry. A mimic never just copies the words of the mimicked; he or she employs and appropriates the stylistic resources that index the voice and identity of the mimicked, so that the act of mimicry is clearly perceived to be an instance of double voicing. Mimicry thus always involves (at least) two voices, that of the mimic and that of the mimicked. Since mimicry is

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precisely about the relationship between the two voices, it is also inseparable from stancetaking. Because a speaker engaged in mimicry must place his or her own voice in relation to the voice that is being mimicked, such positioning and alignment necessarily results in some kind of evaluation or attitudinal assessment (often, the stance taken in mimicry is a negative one). Of course, such potential for evaluation explains why people mimic others in the first place—mimicry allows them to take a stance.

Recent developments in the theory of stance help us add greater detail to our understanding of the semiotic mechanism underlying this process. In this paper, I argue that understanding mimicry in terms of stance can provide us with a more precise way for articulating the evaluative effects produced by mimicry's multivocality. The main claim I want to make is that stance and mimicry are connected through the mediation of style (Eckert and Rickford, 2001)—interconnected set of features that constitute recognizable, enregistered ways of speaking (Agha, 2007) and contribute to the performance of particular personae (Eckert, 2004, 2008). Through an analysis of practices of vocal mimicry in Korean popular culture called *seongdaemosa*, I show that the semiotic space provided by mimicry juxtaposes the style of the mimicked with other linguistic forms, leading to subtle shifts in the interpretations of the original style.<sup>1</sup> It is such differential between the indexical meaning of styles that serves as the semiotic basis for stancetaking in mimicry; and by negotiating and manipulating this differential, mimics are able to attribute drastically divergent evaluations to the targets of their mimicry.

## 2. Stance and the meaning of style

The perspective of stance has been influential in shaping our understanding of how the meaning of style (Eckert, 2004, 2008) is constituted. For instance, in one of the most influential work on stance and indexical meaning, Ochs (1992) argues that indexicality often works in indirect ways—that is, linguistic forms that index an identity do not do so in a direct and exclusive fashion. For instance, forms that index gender (such as tag questions, as part of Lakoff's (2004) "Women's language," or sentence final particles such as *wa* in Japanese) usually do not point to a female identity in themselves, but only through the mediation of "a web of socially organized pragmatic meanings" (Ochs, 1992:341–342), which include broader affective and epistemological stances. Thus, tag questions primarily index a stance of uncertainty, which may in turn be used to index a gendered identity via the ideological stereotypes of pragmatic behavior attributed to women. This perspective implies that indexicality is not a fixed association between linguistic form and social meaning, but something that is constantly reworked and reinterpreted by speakers who adopt the forms based on the stances they are associated with.

The notion of stance, then, has always been a key component of current theories of style as social practice. Given the recent developments in the study of stance, however, we might argue that there is even more room for grounding the role of stance in the constitution of styles in interactional practice. The past few years have seen a number of studies that emphasize the dialogic and intersubjective nature of stancetaking. According to these studies, stance never occurs in an interactional vacuum, but is always embedded in highly specific dialogic interactions between interlocutors, and must be understood in that context. One particularly important aspect of stance here is the cross-turn text-metrical dimension of talk (Lempert, 2008). Studies that emphasize the dialogicality of stancetaking have focused on patterns of parallelism across turns produced by different speakers, variously under terms such as resonance (Du Bois, 2007; Kärkkäinen, 2006; Oropeza-Escobar, 2011; Takanashi, 2011) or fractional congruence (Agha, 2007; Lempert, 2008). Structures of parallelism that emerge across speaker turns can index stances through the degree of similarity and difference between such turns. For instance, Du Bois's (2007) dialogic syntax considers such difference-in-parallelism as "stance differential," which in turn constitutes acts of alignment or disalignment between speakers. It is important to note, in this case, that stance differential does not reside in the purely configurational pattern of similarity or difference. For instance, producing a syntactically identical structure from the previous speaker's utterance does not universally index maximum alignment of stance. As Lempert argues, "it would be wrong to try to wrest this parallelistic figuration of action from its co(n) textual moorings and assign to it some independent, categorical pragmatic-poetic value" (2008:573). What is highlighted in dialogic studies of stance is, instead, how the text-metrical structure of parallel utterances serves as a space for speakers to negotiate their relative positioning in a multimodal fashion.

This aspect of stance is highly relevant for our understanding of style, for the indexical meaning of linguistic forms may also be seen as shaped by the alternative configuration of forms they are inserted into as speakers employ them in their discourse. For instance, Eckert (2008) explains how indexical meaning shifts and evolves as a linguistic form is used as

<sup>1</sup> While the examples I discuss in this paper might also be called *parody*, I choose to use the term *mimicry* here, because the examples focus on a performance of similarity rather than satirical commentary (i.e. the performers explicitly frame their performances as mimics of others). However, as the discussion below makes clear, the dialogic nature of all double-voiced phenomena makes an absolute distinction between mimicry and parody practically impossible.

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