



Cartographies of language: Making sense of mobility among Korean transmigrants in Singapore



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ABSTRACT

This paper studies the way transmigrants rely on linguistic difference as an important resource for making sense of their experiences of mobility. Through an analysis of how Korean transmigrants in Singapore talk about their experience of transnational movement, it shows that distinctions of language, which are commonly articulated in hierarchical terms such as competence, legitimacy, and economic value, generate an ideologized image of space for the migrants—a map that allows them to actively interpret space and imagine their position in the global world. It then considers the implications such cartographies of language have for the emerging sociolinguistics of globalization.

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1. Language, migration, and mobility

With growing prominence of migration in our globalizing world, scholars of language have been devoting greater attention to the intersection of language and migration. A focus on the increasingly diverse and complex patterns of migration, commonly discussed under the rubric of superdiversity (Vertovec, 2007), has led to a more serious engagement with new modes of communicative practice and multilingualism, as well as intense rethinking of the notion of language as a homogeneous, bounded, quantifiable entity (Otsuji and Pennycook, 2010; Blommaert and Rampton, 2011; Canagarajah, 2013). Such studies also uncover the material and ideological conditions that subject migration-related multilingualism to regimes of inequality and discrimination, through their critique of language policies and language ideologies that constrain the way value of multilingual practices are measured (Blommaert et al., 2005a). Through this body of work, sociolinguistic and linguistic anthropological research is finding a point of intervention into the shifting ethnoscape of globalization (Appadurai, 1996), by observing its linguistic correlates and implications from an ethnographic perspective.

In this paper, however, I attempt to push further the insights of such work in order to develop a perspective on mobility that gives a more central position to language. In studies that focus on new modes of multilingualism and their sociopolitical consequences, those modes of language use often end up remaining an epiphenomenal outcome of mobility. That is, such studies may emphasize new linguistic practices and new complexities in language use that arise as people move across erstwhile borders and critically examine the translingual nature of those practices, but stop short of exploring how language might be the very thing that facilitates or constrains the mobility of people in the first place. This gap misses a significant link between language and mobility, as language must be understood as a key semiotic resource for our imagination and constitution of space (Johnstone, 2004). Language often forms the basis for our differentiation of different places and people

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who occupy those spaces (Niedzielski and Preston, 1999), and it is also a fundamental way through which people build connections across geographically distant locations (Eisenlohr, 2006; Koven, 2013). In this sense, mobility, which presumes a spatial and social landscape through which it can take place, must be seen as fundamentally shaped and mediated through language. More importantly, in the context of the intensifying commodification of language, where language is increasingly seen as an acquirable skill and economic resource (Cameron, 2005; Urciuoli, 2008; Duchêne and Heller, 2012), entire projects of mobility within and across national borders often come to be structured around complex networks of ideological associations between language and geographical space (Waters, 2006; Park and Bae, 2009; Gao, 2012). Some people cross borders for the purpose of language acquisition; linguistic difference often rationalizes mobility (or immobility) through the boundaries they constitute; and it is through language that people on the move imagine and construct themselves as migrants.

These aspects remind us that it is not enough to consider how language is reshaped and repurposed as a consequence of mobility; we must also consider how language organizes and facilitates mobility. In this paper, I explore what a study of language and migration that emphasizes the constitutive role of language in mobility might look like, using the case of Korean transmigrants in Singapore as an example. Through an analysis of how language and linguistic difference is implicated in the way Korean migrants articulate their experiences of global movement, this paper discusses how their imagination of space could fruitfully be understood as *cartographies of language*—that is, acts of understanding space through the mediation of metalinguistic conceptions of language and communication—and consider how this metaphor of map making through language might also be useful in our investigation of migrants (and non-migrants) engaged in different forms of transnational imagination.

2. Cartographies of language

Since the late 1990s, a growing trend among the Korean middle class has been to seek short- and mid-term migration opportunities to work or study abroad as a means of accumulating symbolic and cultural capital (Park and Lo, 2012). While Korean migration up till the 1990s has predominantly been centered on long-term immigration, Korea's economic development, increasing ease of travel, and cosmopolitan striving of the middle class (Park and Abelman, 2004) have led to the growth of more flexible modes of migration that allow migrants to strategically cross borders in order to gain a more advantageous location in transnational space and to reproduce their classed interests. In the context of the country's rapid neoliberalization, global mobility has become not simply a means of staying ahead in the increasingly intensifying competition in the domestic job market, but also a way of becoming an ideal neoliberal subject who realizes one's true potential in the global stage (Park, 2010a).

In these modes of migration, language serves as an important key, as language ideologies that mediate the value of languages and images of their speakers in spatial terms play a major role in shaping the transmigrants' motivation to move as well as the specific form of their itinerary (Park and Bae, 2009). For instance, one such mode of migration, *jogi yuhak* (early study abroad), involves pre-university students going abroad to attend schools in foreign countries, often separated from their families, for the purpose of gaining valuable cultural and linguistic capital, the most important of which is competence in English (Song, 2011; Kang, 2012; Shin, 2012; Bae, 2013, 2014). In this case, different geographical locations are seen as differently conducive to acquisition of proper English. The US, for example, becomes the ideal location not only because of its centrality in the global economy and its influence on South Korea, but also because of its association with the variety of English that Koreans typically consider to be most valuable, American English. Such language ideological interpretation of space, then, shapes the choices that students and their families make when deciding to go abroad, and also constrains how a person's trajectory in transnational space will be understood. So, study abroad in the US, which is indexed by the acquisition of an American English accent, may be seen as opening up the potential for securing work opportunities on a much more global scale, while study in a country such as Singapore, which is indexed by local forms of English accent, may be understood as more limited in terms of future possibilities (Kang, 2012; Bae, 2013).

We may argue that such language ideological mediation of transnational movement amounts to *cartographies of language*. By likening the language ideological interpretation of mobility to the art and practice of map-making, I want to highlight how people on the move actively construct transnational space through the mediation of language ideologies. Sociolinguistic and linguistic anthropological work has long recognized how language serves as an important resource for the imagination and construction of space, for linguistic difference is frequently a powerful semiotic resource for creating and reproducing difference in territorial space associated with speakers of different languages (Anderson, 1991; Irvine and Gal, 2000). However, by thinking not only about how language imposes boundaries upon geographical space, but also about how language can be employed in understanding mobility within that socially constituted space, we can reach a better understanding of the role of language in transnational movement of people.

Maps are not simply about identifying one's place in the world, but also about navigating it. Maps are never abstract representations of space, but are always used situationally, to help their users understand their position in relation to other places and their possibilities (or impossibilities) of moving. For instance, map users look out for closely stacked contour lines on the map which represent peaks or gorges that stand in their way; they seek converging lines of bus routes and railways to identify efficient ways of utilizing the transportation system; they consider the density of attractions indicated on the map to distinguish between fun places to go to and dull places to get away from. In this sense, the metaphor of cartography emphasizes how people position themselves as *agents* who move through space, who construct such space as inhabited space, a

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