Linguistic Motivations of a Marginalized Populace in Seoul

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Abstract: *This research explores a novel interplay between language and identity. The case studies particularly delve in the identities of gay men and how their sexual orientation may have shaped their motivation to learn and use English. Also, the research aims to diversify perspectives by examining the gay standpoint as a second language learner and user, along with the gay identity and the motivation to study English. Looking closely at three gay participants with different levels of English proficiency, the studyprobes the reasons behind participants' conversational styles together and their uniquelinguistic features, and explores the relation between how people view themselves and their language acquisition and use.*

Keywords: *English, identity, language acquisition, linguistic motivation, South Korea*

1. INTRODUCTION

Demonstrating a uniquely identifying conversational style comes naturally to interlocutors as a means of self-expression. Therefore, it is important that the accurate wordings and nuances be chosen not only to communicate successfully, but also to express the self in an appropriate way that shows one as a member of a particular community at the time of discourse. In this regard, language is said to reflect one's identity, as it sheds light on how identityis defined through language use. This can also be seen in the relation between identity and language acquisition. In research conducted by Kim (2013), it was noted that Korean graduate students in the United States were struggling with identity construction in many situations, nothing that "their investments to learn and use English are highly affected by their multiple identities that change in various social contexts." As well, Ibrahim (1999) succinctly stated that "because language is not neutral, learning it cannot and should not be either".This demonstrates that the motivation to gain access to a specific community, influenced by what people have as their imagined identity, can impact the degree of effort in learning a new language or in adjusting linguistic behaviors.

This study will be dealing with the phonological and pragmatic factors involved in casual conversation of two Korean gay men who speak English as an L2, and one native English speaker from London, currently staying in Korea. By linguistic analysis at their speech, we will examine the distinctive features that differentiate them in terms of English usage which seem to be influenced by their stated goals and motivations. The intention is to explore the connections among the three concepts of identity, motivation, and language usage.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Discussing the characteristics demonstrated by second language learners, Kramsch (2006) identified two as "desire" and "myth." Of particular interest is "desire", as we are interested in exploring the details within our research subject group of the terms for forming a new identity within surrounding community for L2 speakers, such as the conditions "favorable to the construction" of an identity. Then, it becomes important to see what the working mechanism is deep within the mind that causes the construction of the self. With regard to the basic need to identify the self essentially, away from the situated environment, Kristeva (1980) concluded that this need for identification is so strong as to be called "desire," which plays a role in language acquisition as the means to escape from the norm presented at the moment. It brings new opportunities to express oneself in a distinctive manner, which aids in escaping from confronted reality. However, there is another side, where there is the desire to keep the status quo, for it is what makes people feel at ease. Going against the norm gives a chance to define oneself with limited influence of surroundings, but it can be threatening to "their integrity" (Kramsch, 2006). We see these two conflicting sides as our gay participants want to be openly "gay," but face difficulties stemming from negative societal pressure, which can be variable depending on the target audience. Returning to the concept of "myth", Kramsch (2006) defined it as "a form of speech, a way of using language less for its objective truth value than for the subjective beliefs and emotions that it expresses, elicits and performs." As an example, she explained how saying

"have a good day" is common in retail stores, intended to appear courteous and not to literally demand the person to have a good day. Such an objective purpose is then given a closer look to reveal a "basic truth," or the subjective meaning, of a market economy where customers must be satisfied for the business to be prosperous. This deeper, subjective area of expressions reflect idealized images and beliefs in communities. The discussion of "myth" gives better insight into the observable speech styles utilized by the participants and connecting them to what they genuinely indicate in their imagined identity and community.

No exploration of motivation is complete without a discussion of its ultimate result: the investment. This can be understood by observing that motivation is a key element affecting language education, leading to more investment in learning. Kim's (2013) research on Korean ESL Graduate Students depicts it well. In this study, the research participants explained that they were inspired to study English to be the members of an "imagined Korean elitist community." This led them to become graduate students seeking higher degrees of education, as well as proficient speakers of English. Nonetheless, as they faced the reality of being peripheral members of the school community as a result of their limited English skills, they also had to come to terms with the identity conflict brought forward by their imagined community, leading to difficulties in continuing their investment. Kim (2013) concludes that motivation and investment are influenced by social and political factors that form the imagined self-identity aligned with the certain image they have of the target community they wish to join in. Such a concept unfolds the relationship between people's sexual identities and self-display through language, or the intended self-display by learning a new language.

Morgan (1995/1996) noted that identity should be viewed as dynamic. That is to say, it is constructed as an ongoing process as interlocutors interact with a changing environment, instead of forming an identity through a fixed set of experiences. Since subjective positions change as one encounters dynamic settings, such as in formal meetings for work and casual gatherings with family members, behavior is adjusted accordingly. The adjustments are done deliberately and mainly through the control of language use. This could imply that the imagined identity of the moment shapes the way of expression through language. However, it can also go where language shapes perception and thus identity, as Schecter and Bayley (2002) conceive. They conceptualized that language works as "acts of identity" after observing the bilingual development of Mexican-background families living in Texas.

Ibrahim (1999) identified that desire to join a community can lead English learners to intentionally pursue a "marginalized linguistic norm" that is common within it. Further observations of the author also linked identity, needs, desires, and investment together in language learning.

3. RATIONALE

Sexual orientation is a strong facet of identity, where one may choose to publicly show his gay identity while another may feel the need to hide it. The phenomenon itself suggests that there is much conflict in the way this particular group of people identify themselves in given social settings. Also, gay men are believed to display identifying linguistic markers, including features such as lisps when they speak English (Van Borsel, J., De Bruyn, E., Lefebvre, E., Sokoloff, A., De Ley, S., & Baudonck, N., 2009). Therefore, it was concluded that observing gay men may offer opportunities for novel research and noteworthy perspectives in the areas of identity and sociolinguistics.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following questions were selected to guide the study:

1) Especially for L2 speakers of English, what motivated them learn English?

2) Especially for L2 speakers of English as well, what have been the environments for learning and practicing English?

3) Given that the research participants would be self-identify as gay, did they or do they have any intention to hide or express their sexual identities in certain environments?

4) How do the replies to the above questions affect their English patterns?

4. RESEARCH METHOLOGY

This studyemploys a qualitative study of English speakers who identify themselves as gay men. It aims to focus on their motivation to learn English in respect to the expression of identity, how it affects their investment in language acquisition, as well as adjustments in language use. Data was collected from three individual interviews in a casual environment, together with informal observations on the mannerisms employed by the participants during the interview. In reference to King's (2008) work on the identities and the investments of L2 speakers, we hypothesized that gay men have strong motives to learn English to have better access to a larger gay community. We also paid attention to the varying motivations to employ certain conversational styles. The way people express themselves hints at how they would like to be viewed by others. In such a case, English speakers with a gay identity reflect who they are by controlling their language usage and adjusting their mannerisms. The influence of such conceptual processes on the motivation to study and use English is addressed in the findings of the interviews.

5. DATA COLLECTION

For participants, we had a goal of three for the study, so we spoke to a Korean gay male acquaintance. Since more interviewees were needed, other attempts were made to have people involved, such as contacting the campus club for sexual minorities, posting a public notice on the school website, and finding other participants using social networks, but it was difficult to find people who would willingly participate in the interview. The fallback option was to visit a well-known gay area of Seoul's Itaewon district, where subjects could be approached directly, which was successful. The participants were all self-described gay, two L2 and one L1 speaker of English. Two of the participants were Korean, and one was from London.

Notes and audio recordings were made of the interviews. Interviews often began with some ice-breaking questions to get into the topic of study, and to let the participants lead the rest of the conversation. As Kong, Mahoney, and Plummer (2003) explain, it is more important to construct an "ethical identity" within the gay community by demonstrating that we are "trusted insiders" who will not view and judge negatively. Clearly, we aimed to build such trust. One of the interviews was done after having dinner together, which helped building rapport so that we could ease off any tension, thus leading to a more genuine, in-depth conversation. For the other two, we were at a bar where people mingled freely, even without any prior acquaintance, offering a better chance to interact with potential subjects and become friendly enough to ask for an interview.

In accordance with the research conducted by King (2008), we opted to conduct both ethno methodological and linguistic analyses of the interview transcripts insofar as it serves our goal of examining both the backgrounds, including motivations and environment, and the linguistic and extra-linguistic characteristics of the participants' speech. Ethno methodological approaches to analyses of interviews were employed, assigning values to spoken answers. For linguistic approaches, transcriptions and recordings were utilized to draw out data for analysis.

6. FINDINGS

6.1 Brian

Brian is a single, self-identified gay man who had only studied English in Korea. He currently works for a foreign government-aligned office and uses English daily for his job. His English education began in middle school where it was mandatory to study the language. Initially, his motivation to study English was his personal interest in learning grammatical structures. He highlights his early investments in English education when he mentions participating in English contests held by schools and achieving first place much of the time, demonstrating the confidence he has as a fluent L2 speaker.

Later, he confesses that he had poor speaking skills, compared to his grammar. For instance, in his experience as a conscript in the KATUSA (Korean Augmentation to the U.S. Army), he knew little of conversational English--he would literally look "up" when a U.S. soldiers would casually approach him saying, "What's up?" However, as he enjoyed accompanying American soldiers and later, the gay friends he met socializing in Itaewon, his speaking skills improved. Now, he has to use English frequently for his work and in communicating with friends who are of multiple linguistic backgrounds. As a result, he is constantly exposed to environments where he needs to employ his English skills to gain access to the surrounding communities.

One of the interview questions referenced self-identification of one's own accent. When we asked Brian about how he would define his, he showed uncertainty and rather, referred to other people's definition of his accent:

Excerpt 1

DK:　　So, what kind of accent do you think you have now?

Brian:　I have no idea. I mean some people… well, you must have studied English from Canada, and I'm like, I don't have an American accent I guess. Some of them asked me like "You must have studied in Canada" or some people said "Well, you have slightly West Coast accent".

Interestingly enough, he never referred to having a Korean accent of English, as other Koreans are typical to do when asked the same question. Instead, he answered with other English speakers' opinions, which is likely to have influenced the way he identifies his own accent, and moreover, himself as an L2 speaker.

Such a fact is clearly depicted by further discussion of accents, particularly about the stereotypical pronunciation that is believed to be demonstrated by gay men. He points to the occasion when he used to have such an accent, and defines the overall mannerism as an act of "flaming out queens," a slang that his group of friends used to describe being "flamboyantly gay". Apparently, he learned it naturally as he socialized in the gay part of Itaewon. Brian cautiously and implicitly acknowledges that "flaming out" could be a typical behavior, both verbally and nonverbally displayed by gay men, while explaining how he picked it up from many of his friends who demonstrated such behavior.

Then, the question was whether he learned this behavior consciously to gain membership to desired or imagined social groups, or whether it was simply the environment affecting him. In response, he asserted that it was the case of the latter, a result of being with gay friends, as shown in the next excerpt. His quick, emphatic response highlights the unwillingness he feels toward employing the "gay-labeled" language use and mannerisms.

Excerpt 2

SL:　　So, it wasn't a conscious decision, and it was just because of the kind of company you keep in?

Brian:　No, not at all.

DK:　　When did you realize that you had that?

Brian:　That…that accent?

DK:　　Yeah.

Brian:　Um, let me see. Well, I was talking to my…then again, you know what? Back then, all the other speaking people I used to know was up on the hill, gay hill, so gay guys. So, talking back to them and all of sudden I realize that I was doing this (showing gestures) and this, and I'm like oh--I just became one of them!

SL:　　So why did you get rid of that?

Brian:　Well I maintained that accent for kind a while, and I had to go back to school, but um, I was, I guess I was self-conscious about my accent back then because I knew I picked them from gay guys, so…

SL:　　So, but if you're gay, then why would that be a problem?

Brian:　You know, I was about to graduate, right? So as for me, getting into the real world, doing a job…

DK:　　So, you don't think gay…that the gay accent wouldn't have worked very well at work?

After this exchange, he goes on to explaining what he does at his work: communicating with L1 English-speaking counterparts, and expresses discomfort in letting people at work know of his sexual orientation. Later he even says that he does not want to be "labeled" or "made fun of." It shows that he is well aware of the fact that linguistic features are used as markers to people's identity, as he feels uncomfortable using the flamboyant style of talking learned from his friends that would possibly give away his gay identity. Also, his unwillingness to display his identity led him to hide the accent he picked up from his friends. It indicates that he is trying to modify his language

use depending on the community of people he encounters. This means that at work, he needs to adjust his pronunciation to interact with his colleagues, the target community he must survive in, and he is willing to do so because he is motivated to keep the membership of the community.

6.2 Chris

Chris is in his mid-40s, and he is a middle-class Korean man who identifies himself as gay. At the time of the interview, he was busy interacting with customers, as he is the owner of the bar. During the interview, we could not ascertain how he learned English, and he seemed to be much more comfortable speaking in Korean. His English was more of a combination of simple and basic words rather than well-structured complete sentences. Also, his intonation and pronunciation were significantly different from those of the native speakers of English, resembling more of a standard Korean accent. Considering these characteristics, it is supposed that he learned English in casual surroundings for communication purposes.

Moreover, he implied his motivation for learning English was to communicate with Caucasians within the gay community, especially those who visit his bar. He showed a strong preference for them, suggesting his motivation. When asked directly if his English learning was predominantly inspired by sexual desires, he concurred. Here, we could clearly see that both his motivation as an L2 speaker and the actual use English are controlled by the way he sees himself, which is a gay man who seeks intimate relationships with gay Caucasian males.

6.3 John

Unlike the other two participants, John is a native speaker of English. He is also a self-identified gay man of Jamaican descent born in London, 29 years old, and working as a flight attendant. Since John was born in an English speaking country, there were obviously different motivations to learn the language. However, he confessed that he shifts the way he talks in terms of mannerisms and accent when he visits Jamaica, as there he needs to hide his gay identity. By his own admission, gay people in Jamaica are severely discriminated against, so John describes hiding his "gayness" accordingly.

Excerpt 3

SL:　　　How long were you in Jamaica before you moved?

John:　　Uh, yeah, I was born in London, but my dad's from Jamaica.

SL:　　　Oh, okay.

John:　　…and whenever I go to Jamaica, I have to be very careful about how I speak, who I speak to, because in Jamaica, if you're gay…that means they'll burn you alive…"I'll shoot you, goanna stab you" and whatever… Yeah, no batty boy.

Here, John says that he's been hiding his sexual orientations in Jamaica literally "to stay alive." In this exchange, we can see his need for adjusting language patterns in order to not be ostracized in the society or placed into a life-threatening situation. There were, however, several occasions that he did not successfully hide his identity and encountered trouble:

Excerpt 4

SL:　　　So, have you ever had a difficult experience on a flight because you, maybe slipped up?

John:　　Yeah, in Jamaica.

SL:　　　Okay what happened?

John:　　Three passengers were smoking weed on the flight….

SL:　　　Oh my god. Wait, wait, you can't smoke on the plane!

John:　　Exactly…It was a flight from London to Jamaica…They were in the economy class, in their chairs…So I went to them and said, "Guys, really sorry, but you can't do that on the airplane."…and I got "Fuck off batty boy", "I'm glad for you to be alive so I can spit on you"…

SL: What do you think it was that gave them your identity away?

John: I don't know…I should have been more assertive maybe…

Interestingly, John shifted his language patterns to hide his identity because revealing his sexual orientation may result in severe abuse in certain countries where his job brings him. He goes further and shares his personal experience of "coming out of the closet" when he was 16 and the slight resentment towards Jamaica's social attitudes towards gays. He keeps on highlighting that he had to adjust his talking mannerisms to hide his identity to be safe, which seems to be his greatest motivation in employing more masculine-perceived ways of speaking. Yet, these attempts may not always be successful.

Excerpt 5

John: So, after that flight I realized that I have to hide my sexuality, put it away on board, I just wanted safety, and that is it… you can't be this and you can't be that.

SL: How do you feel about that?

John: I don't like it…If I go outside in London, I can talk to my boyfriend all day long…but if I go to Jamaica, I can't say whatever I want because I have a risk of getting…in Jamaica, the Bible is their life…I came out when I was 16, because I hated hiding my self. I am me, and that is it.

Throughout the interview with John, we discovered that even though the motivation that shapes John's speaking condition is slightly different compared to the other participants, he similarly modulates his way of speech both consciously or unconsciously to meet the demands of the situation; survival. He showed slight resentment towards Jamaican society which leaves him no choice but to hide himself and "stay inside the closet" when he visits.

7. CONCLUSIONS

This study sought to examine the distinctive phonological and pragmatic features of L2 English speech produced by gay men in Seoul, in an attempt to differentiate the terms of English usage which could reflect learner motivations and goals.

Based on the conducted interviews, this study seemingly reaffirms Ibrahim's (1999) claim that neither language or language learning is a neutral endeavor, supporting our hypotheses that identity and relevant motivation can affect language usage. Casual meetings were able to capture the most readily available natural and typical real-life conversations, aided by conducting the interviews in a familiar and environment frequented by the research participants.

The participants in the study were all self-identified gay men with varying motivations for learning and communicating in English. Their English usage was admittedly modified to serve special needs such as blending into their work places or the gay community, or for purposes of engaging in intimate relationships with others whose L1 was English, or even for a sense of security and survival. The participants acknowledged, and to some extent confessed, their personal cognitive processes regarding their identity and language. These observations were often uncovered linguistically, yet some were conveyed through extra linguistic features such as gesture, intonation, or facial expression.

After analysis of the collected interview data, we can conclude that our findings support the hypothesis: gay men have particular motivations shaped by their sexual identities, and their acquisition and usage of English may be adjusted accordingly.

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