CONSTRUCTING ETHNIC IDENTITY THROUGH DISCOURSE: SELF-CATEGORIZATION AMONG KOREAN AMERICAN CAMP COUNSELORS

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Abstract

In this paper, I demonstrate how Korean American camp counselors locally construct ethnic identity through the practice of self-categorization in discourse. Self-categorization, or the identification of oneself in terms of ethnic identity, serves to position counselors in terms of Korean ethnicity and to associate that identity with one’s personal goals in participating in the Korean camp. Using videotaped data of counselors’ meetings, I show that while debating their views on what a Korean camp should be and their motivations for participating in the camp, counselors make relevant their ethnic identities by describing themselves as more ‘American’, more ‘Korean American’, or more ‘Korean’. In addition, the counselors discuss whether the teaching of Korean heritage or the mentorship of the campers should be the primary objective of the camp. This opposition between ‘heritage’ and ‘mentorship’ is cast as a source of tensions that map onto ideologies of identity, whereby ‘Korean American’ identity acquires the local meaning of being linked to the importance of mentorship over Korean heritage. In this way, counselors construct their ethnic identities as a means of classifying themselves relationally within a field of oppositions, at the same time indexing a particular stance about what a Korean camp should be.

Keywords: Ethnic identity, Self-categorization, Korean American, Heritage, Indexicality, Stance

0. Introduction

Recent discussions in the field of discourse analysis have posed the question of whether and when issues of demography or identity become relevant in discourse when not referred to specifically in talk. In a recent published debate on this issue of ‘context’², Schegloff, Wetherell, and Billig present various perspectives on this issue, using approaches ranging from conversation analysis to critical discourse analysis. One of the main issues discussed in the series of papers centered on Schegloff’s (1997) claim that gender relevance in interaction has to be evidenced by participants’ orientations in the talk itself. This claim met with criticism from scholars who found the interpretative limitation too rigid for the study of language and gender. While this theoretical debate continues, with strong advocates on both sides of the issue, situations in which talk is

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² This debate appears in a special issue of Discourse & Society, vol. 8.
focused around identity are also relevant to the notion of context and how speakers create it. After all, what happens when participants do talk about identities in discourse? And are there relevant observations to be made beyond the mere topic of discussion when it comes to how such identities are expressed?

In this paper, I examine the connection between relevant identities (in particular, ethnic identity), the articulation of these identities through discourse, and the ideologies indexed (in the sense of Ochs 1992) by these identities in the interactions of Korean American camp counselors. In particular, I show that a discourse approach to how identities are established and maintained can provide insight into how speakers construct ethnic identity in interaction. In examining ethnic identity, I am not concerned with the participants’ cultural heritage, or the fact that all the participants discussed in this paper are ethnically Korean, but rather in how they identify themselves, or self-categorize, in the course of a discussion in such a way that makes ethnic identity relevant to the interaction. I use ‘ethnic identity’ here to denote a positioning on the part of a speaker within the ethnic category of ‘Korean’. In Jenkins’ (1994) terms, I make a distinction between ‘ethnic category’, or the identity assigned to a group by others, and ‘ethnic group’, which is an identity established from within. Using this distinction, I hope to show that a more dynamic model of identity formation is needed to address the interactional processes at work in the data analyzed here. Cornell and Hartmann (1998: 20-21) discuss the process by which an ethnic group comes into being:

A population or social collectivity may be simply an ethnic category, assigned an ethnic identity by outsiders. Once that identity becomes subjective - that is, once that population sees itself in ethnic terms, perhaps in response to the identity outsiders assign to it - it becomes an ethnic group.

This distinction between ethnic category and ethnic group is useful in articulating the subtle meanings behind the labels, ‘Korean’ and ‘Korean American’, among others. In another paper, Kang and Lo (ms.) discuss the inconsistencies in usage of these ethnic terms among speakers. We have found that merely tracing the use of terms like ‘Korean’, ‘Korean American’, or ‘American’ is futile without an attempt at understanding what range of meanings speakers associate with these terms. On one level, the participants of the Korean camp itself, as a recognizable institutional body, may be described as an ethnic category. When the members start to see themselves in terms of ethnicity (as ‘Korean’ counselors or ‘Korean American’ counselors), this is how they constitute their ethnic group. Because subjectivities are expressed variably in discourse, we can trace how different counselors constitute their ethnic identities, or create ‘ethnic groups’, in different ways. In the process of becoming an ethnic group, articulating a Korean identity involves a subjectivity that is accomplished differently by different individuals.

The question of whether there is, in fact, a unified Korean identity established among these participants is also one that will be addressed. In terms of social categories such as ‘Korean’ or ‘Korean American’, what these categories represent is dependent on the particular context and what they are locally opposed to. In this sense, discourse creates, establishes, and transforms boundaries that foreground and background what we think of as our identity (Barth 1969). In the data analyzed here, I demonstrate how participants make ethnic identity relevant to the discussion of the Korean camp through the act of self-categorization. Such an association represents a very distinct kind of identity discourse than what one might find in a different context. The importance of
analyzing identity in the local context of specific acts and stances is further explored in He (this issue) with regard to roles and identities in the heritage language classroom. In both contexts, identities are constructed by particular acts and stances that are indexed through specific linguistic practices. Given that the present analysis adopts a modified constructionist approach to the notion of identity, the accomplishment of ethnic identity is located in the discursive performance of this identity; that is, speakers construct, modify, transform, and differentiate identities through the use of language.

1. Data

The data for this study comes from a larger corpus of video data comprised of over eleven hours of meeting interactions that were collected by the author as a participant observer during the summer of 1996. The participants consist of over thirty volunteer camp counselors of a Korean cultural camp in the northern California Bay area (which I will call Camp HPH). During meetings throughout the summer, these ethnically Korean counselors, ranging in age from 17–25, planned and prepared camp activities for over one hundred campers. The meetings were frequent, and the main language used was English. Discussions sometimes centered on ethnic identity issues, especially Korean identity, since the cultural camp offered classes on Korean language, etiquette, and folk music, among others. But when the discussion turned to the purpose or goal of the camp and the counselors’ motivations for participating in the camp, issues of ethnic identity were made relevant in a more poignant way that served to establish, challenge, and transform notions of a shared ethnic identity.

In one particularly long and emotionally charged meeting of a diverse group of 1st, 2nd and 1.5-generation camp counselors, counselors discuss and debate the goals of the Korean camp, and, by extension, the reasons why each counselor has volunteered to participate. Some counselors seek to share their experiences as Korean Americans with the campers. Many of them have highly individual, personal experiences growing up Korean in American society that they feel they can share with the younger campers. Another strong motivation is the teaching of Korean culture, which is something the camp can provide that is not available in the campers’ regular schools. The perceived choice between 'heritage' and 'mentorship' as the main motivation for participating in the camp is cast as a source of tension that gets mapped onto ideologies of ethnic identity in the course of the meeting. The counselors, through their discursive practices, associate certain motivations, like the emphasis on teaching Korean culture, with notions of being 'more Korean' and the emphasis on mentorship with being 'more American'. The subtle ways in which speakers indexically link ideologies regarding the camp to ethnic identity demonstrate that 'being Korean' is anything but stable, homogenous, or fixed.

In a similar study of the later generations of an immigrant community, Anny Bakalian (1993) examines the reconstruction of Armenian American identity. She traces the process from what she calls ‘being’ Armenian to ‘feeling’ Armenian. ‘Being’ Armenian refers to such qualities as sharing a unique language, lifestyle, an identifiable Armenian culture, and Armenian social networks. In contrast, ‘feeling’ Armenian does not necessarily entail any of the above, but rather, centers on pride in one’s heritage and a strong sense of ‘peoplehood’ (Bakalian 1993: 6). This distinction between ‘being’ and ‘feeling’ may be helpful in thinking about the counselors participating in the Korean
camp. The essential aspects of ‘being’ Korean are clearly emphasized at the camp itself, which is evident in the classes taught and the goals of the camp as an institution. However, it is clear that counselors are also orienting to the condition of ‘feeling’ Korean in the way they articulate their own personal goals and motivations. This split in how counselors talk about the experience of identity may also point to the difference between ‘ethnic category’ and ‘ethnic group’ discussed above and suggest ways in which ethnic group formation takes place as discursive performance.

2. Ideologies of ‘Korean’ identity

2.1. Ideologies of a shared ‘Korean’ identity

When considering that this Korean camp is an organization based on the common ethnic background of its participants (all campers and counselors are ethnically Korean), one may ask why counselors may feel the need to self-categorize in terms of ethnicity in an organization that assumes a certain degree of ethnic unity. Part of the reason may lie in the strong ideology of a shared Korean identity that is prevalent in the organization. The idea of a Korean summer camp in itself assumes certain notions about the existence of a ‘Korean identity’. Camp HPH started in the mid-1980s, responding to the lack of resources and opportunities for Korean youth in the area to gather with other Korean youth and learn about Korean history, culture, traditions, and experiences. According to a pamphlet distributed during the counselor meetings, the camp has the following objectives:

- Promotion of a better understanding and awareness of Korean cultural heritage, tradition, and history
- Sharing our bi-cultural experiences and expectations as Korean-Americans with our campers
- Providing an opportunity for campers to get together with other young Korean-Americans like themselves, and experience group activities and responsibilities
- Providing guidance for those in need of strength and encouragement in various individual struggles
- Development of friendship, unity, and pride in being Korean-American
- Have a fun and meaningful time!

The promotion of Korean cultural heritage is one of the primary goals, but the objectives also include reference to a ‘Korean-American’ experience and pride. The goals of the camp are also discussed by the camp director, Mark, who points out that Korean children who grow up in ‘this quote unquote American culture’ don’t have the opportunity to learn about Korean culture or to see how other Korean people treat one another or to see a Korean cultural performance (see transcript in Excerpt 4 below). There is an implicit ideology that all counselors should have the same goals in participating in the camp, just as all counselors, deep down, ‘should’ have a shared sense of ethnic identity. This implicit ideology is apparent in the explicit challenges to these ideas that come up in the course of the meeting. It is apparent that some counselors do not share the view that counselors’ motivations should be ‘the same’ or that all counselors share a similar sense of being (or ‘feeling’) ‘Korean’. The resistance
to this ideology of ‘Korean’ identity may provide one reason why counselors feel the need to self-categorize in terms of distinct ethnic groups when among a group of counselors of the same heritage, or ethnic category.

The specific goals and intentions of the camp become a focus of discussion at some point in the counselors’ meeting, and the acceptance of such goals among the participants comes into question when counselors begin to challenge how Korean identity should be presented and taught at the camp. This debate seems to bring to light the diversity within Korean identity that counselors feel should be a part of the preparation and the execution of the camp itself. Even though the sharing of Korean American experience is explicitly stated as one of the objectives of the camp, counselors clearly orient to the teaching of Korean heritage as the perceived primary objective. Among the ways in which the diversity within the counselors is articulated is through the use of ‘Korean’ not as an inclusive term for all the counselors (e.g. as a hypernym or a superordinate category term) but as a term used in opposition with other terms, like ‘Korean American’ or even ‘American’. The expression of ethnic identity by certain counselors serves to counter notions of a shared cultural heritage and index a distinct perspective on the nature of the Korean camp.

2.2. Heterogeneous ideologies: ‘heritage’ versus ‘mentorship’

In the context of these counselor meetings, the term ‘Korean’ acquires a very specific meaning through the practice of self-categorization. These labels of self-classification occur in the course of discussions regarding the reasons for coming and ‘doing’ the camp. While some may be focused on passing on Korean culture and traditions or instilling a sense of Korean pride, others are more interested in sharing their experiences as Korean Americans growing up in American society. Social issues like dealing with one’s immigrant parents, inter-racial dating, and developing one’s sense of ethnic identity while growing up among European Americans, among others, motivate some counselors to take part in the youth camp. In the interactions discussed below, the counselors perform their own expressions of ethnic identity by evoking these kinds of oppositions and making associations between their beliefs about what a Korean camp should be and their own sense of ethnic identity. In this way, their views on the camp become a kind of shorthand for the expression of ethnic identity for these counselors, who come to position themselves in the terms of these interactionally specific roles and identities.

For the counselors there are very practical consequences for the associations that are made between social categories of counselors and the goals of the camp itself. Because there are more counselors than spots available at the camp, the camp director must decide who can attend the camp. Some potentially good counselors have had to be cut from the roster, and there has been some criticism over the selection process since many ‘Korean American’ counselors have been let go in favor of some ‘Korean’ counselors who are able to teach Korean culture courses, such as Korean language, etiquette, and folk music. Many of these ‘Korean’ counselors are instructors at the Korean Cultural Center (or KCC) and are also present at the meeting analyzed here. Thus the disagreement as to the main focus of the camp has potentially serious repercussions for how certain decisions are made. Some of the self-designated ‘more American’ counselors clearly feel that Korean American campers need mentors who are
able to help them with their identity issues more than they need classes on Korean etiquette. This ideological stance poses problems for the director, who is charged with putting on a cultural camp with all its amenities, while, at the same time, faced with a growing number of eager counselors who may not have this kind of cultural knowledge to pass on to young campers.

Counselors’ discussions of the main goal of the camp must be analyzed in light of the very real consequences of such discussions. In particular, counselors who resist classification as ‘Korean’ counselors use the practice of self-categorization to accomplish various acts: 1) to show their resistance to the ideology of an underlying homogeneous ‘Korean’ identity, 2) to stress their own reasons for participating in the camp, which favors ‘mentorship’ over ‘heritage’ as the main goal of the camp, and 3) to suggest that the explicit sharing of individual goals during the course of the counselors’ meetings is necessary to the preparation for the camp. The accomplishment of these acts can be seen in the local discursive practices of the counselors who use self-categorization in terms of ethnic identity as a means of classifying themselves as to the kind of counselor they are and the goals they espouse for the camp. In these interactions, the ethnic identity associated with ‘Korean Americans’ or ‘Americans’ (in this particular context) acquires the local meaning of being linked to the importance of mentorship, resisting the perceived alternative choice of ‘Korean’ identity and the associated ‘heritage’ goals of the camp. While Bucholtz (this issue) examines how speakers may use linguistic style as a tool to claim or repudiate a certain identity through ‘identity performance’, the indexical link between linguistic practices and ideological stances and acts that speakers construct may also fall into this category of identity performance. These associations are established, recognized, and used further by participants who come to understand how such associations contribute to the reconstruction of identity through locally accomplished means.

3. Ethnic identity through self-categorization

In the course of the meeting, several topics were discussed and debated. But one particularly clear structure that emerged from the interaction was the use of self-categorization. Self-categorization in terms of ethnic identity occurred when new speakers expressed a view about the goals of the camp and/or their own motivations for participating in the camp. These views were also often accompanied by statements of individual identity that were used to somehow explain or support their views about the camp and why counselors should participate. Sometimes speakers used specific labels to identify themselves (e.g. ‘Korean American’ or ‘American’) and sometimes they didn’t. Although the speakers do not always use these explicit ethnic labels, they do demonstrate that they feel a need to locate themselves in terms of ethnic identity in order to take part in the discussion at hand. West and Fenstermaker (2002), in a study of a UC Regents meeting that ended affirmative action policies at the University of California, use the term ‘self-categorization’ to describe the specification of race category, or race category and sex category, memberships. In their study, they found that speakers identified themselves in terms of gender, race, and social class as a way of seeing themselves as accountable (in the sense of Heritage 1984) for their remarks in terms of these category memberships. By introducing oneself as a ‘woman’, or ‘an African American’, a speaker draws attention to her category membership as a means of
interpreting her remarks. The camp counselors in the present study similarly used self-categorization as a means of making relational ethnic identities relevant to the discussion of the Korean camp. While these meetings were not as formal or public as the UC Regents meeting, participants still engaged in locational work to situate themselves in the debate regarding the camp’s goals and the counselors’ motivations.

In the present study, self-categorization is done to specify one’s ethnic affiliation. Given that all participants are ethnically Korean, this makes the practice of self-categorization even more interesting. Participants are clearly not stating a fact of heritage, but rather positioning themselves relationally within a field of oppositions that they themselves structure and define. Because the discussion takes place among participants of the same heritage, the relevant oppositions may not be at first obvious. What is interesting to note, however, is that the field of oppositions varies from speaker to speaker, and part of establishing one’s ‘category’ involves ‘laying out’ one’s specific field of oppositions within which one identifies oneself. While the main debate revolves around the reason for holding this camp, counselors cast their opinions in ethnic identity terms and make the declaration of one’s own identity contingent to one’s argument; or as West and Fenstermaker might state, counselors are held accountable for their views in terms of their ethnic identity. Consequently, the ideologies regarding the goals of the camp compel one to position oneself in terms of ethnic identity (i.e. how ‘Korean’, ‘Korean American’, or ‘American’ one defines oneself as). In other words, one’s motivations for participating in the camp become salient as markers or identifiers of ethnic identity: the reasons for participating, and, by extension, the understanding of the ultimate ‘goals’ of the camp become a touchstone by which one self-categorizes, not just as a counselor, but as a Korean.

In (1), Ellen self-categorizes as ‘American’, but not without the use of repair and qualifications, demonstrating how contested these identities are. She also lodges a complaint that the counselors have not yet discussed their own ideas about the camp and why they are there, illustrating the importance of explicitly sharing one’s identity within the group. Before doing this, however, she explicitly lays out a tripartite field of oppositions using a pronounced list intonation in line 80 within which she later positions herself.

(1) ‘Oppa Enni’ ‘older brother older sister’
69 Ellen: I have a similar story to Sara why I kept coming to camp and why

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3 All excerpts are transcribed using the transcription conventions described in Du Bois et al. (1993). Conventions used in the transcripts here include:

- Intonation Unit {carriage return}
- Truncated intonation unit --
- Truncated word -
- Speaker identity/turn start :
- Rising intonation ?
- Continuing intonation ,
- Falling intonation .
- Pause (short) ..
- Pause (medium) ...
- Quotation quality <Q Q>

Other modified conventions used are:
- Speaker emphasis ALL CAPS
- Research emphasis BOLD
I always come, you know?
and like, I had the exact same revelation she did cause I grew up with a white...crowd, right?
And I think, every year that we have like--
every year that we have camp, there’s always conflict in what the emphasis is gonna be, more Korean, more Korean American, more American, you know?
And everyone comes with different ideas, right?
And like, right now, I disagree with the oppa enni, and I can hang with that, just, you know, whatever, and I’ll do it?
but it’s like, I think we all have different ideas, you know?
And like, as she said, no one’s discussed the ideas?
but it just comes out with our opinions? when we argue like this?
you know?
and it didn’t just come out, we didn’t like lay out like, exactly what we’re here for.
..And I’m here..more on maybe the American side, not American side, but more of like a different- a different angle than some other people come here for,
you know?
And I think that, ..that doesn’t show unless we argue about like this, but we never..just flat out said,
<Q I’m here because,
this is what happened to me Q> as she just did right now.

[Mentor5; 3:59:87-05:05:00]
Counselors’ self-categorizations typically occur: 1) after laying out a field of oppositions within which they can then situate themselves, and 2) when expressing a view about the goals of the camp and/or their own motivations for participating in the camp. The relevant field of oppositions is given in lines 76-81. While Ellen could have argued that merely stating opinions will only lead to arguments, as she says in lines 93-104, as a means of supporting her point that counselors’ ideas about the camp need to be brought out and discussed, she approaches the issue by situating herself in terms of ethnic identity. Ellen aligns herself with ‘the American side’ in lines 105-108, but uses hedges (‘maybe’), repair (‘I’m here…more on’), and other qualifications (‘not American side, / but more of like a different…’). Clearly, the category of ‘American’ is not a straightforward one and requires some explanation. In the process of trying to distinguish herself from the category of ‘Korean’ counselor, Ellen struggles to construct a category of ‘American’ that diverges from a homogeneous ‘Korean’ identity while still including herself as part of the group. What much of the counselors’ talk shows is that not everyone is in agreement as to the meaning of ‘Korean’ identity and how this concept should be presented at the camp itself. Ellen’s insistence that everyone comes with different ideas (lines 81 and 92) and with differing perspectives on the need to discuss what these ideas are challenges the notion that putting on a Korean camp should be straightforward or that everyone who is ethnically Korean must share the same ideas about identity.

Ellen’s talk also explicitly articulates an ideology that says that counselors should be actively locating themselves and self-categorizing. In lines 69-74, she aligns herself with another counselor, Sara, who has just shared her story about how she came to understand her Korean identity after growing up among European American peers. She then goes on to describe qualities of the camp in lines 76-83, which may at first seem to be a departure from her previous comments. When she comes to her complaint that counselors have not discussed their ideas, she returns to self-categorization in lines 105-108, suggesting that her self-classification as ‘more on maybe the American side’ can serve as an explanation or justification for her views about participating in the camp.

Ellen’s talk shows how claiming a ‘more American’ relational identity can also mean rejecting Korean modes of interaction that embrace social hierarchies, like showing respect for elders through the use of the kinship terms oppa (meaning ‘older brother’) and ennii (meaning ‘older sister’). This linguistic practice is one that is taught at the camp as a part of learning Korean culture and heritage. By mentioning specifically the practice of using kinship terms, Ellen also associates a linguistic practice to ideologies of social interaction and hierarchies that she herself does not espouse. For Ellen, being ‘American’ in this particular context means repudiating Korean culture (here, specifically, in the form of the use of kinship terms) as her primary emphasis in participating in the camp.


Some counselors are even more explicit about the association between ethnic identity and ideologies about the camp. For Jeff, his reasons for participating in the camp have to do with being ‘Korean American’ and this self-categorization is used to explain his motivations for going to the camp.
(2) ‘Why I am at camp’

Jeff: I just want to say,
a couple of things,
first,
you know,
why I am at camp.
...Um,
.....to be quite..blunt about it,
or,
to be quite,
you know,
simple as can be,
I just love kids,
and um,
..I just wanna,
you know,
give..what I have..to the kids,
I mean um,
I think maybe H- HPH’s,
you know,
quote unquote mission statement,
I guess is to,
spread Korean pride to these kids or--
or to,
you know,
make sure we have these performances,
so on and so forth,
to experience,
so the kids can experience Korean things that they haven’t

..My intentions are--
are very different.
Um,
I think that ma--
you know,
by me being there,
being as a mentor,
as a Korean American,
maybe I can instill that pride,
but my basically- basic intention is just to..be there for them,
you know,

[Mentor8; 00:20:81-01:42:64]

Like Ellen in Excerpt 1 above, Jeff categorizes himself negatively by declaring himself in terms of what he is not. In stating his reasons for going to the camp, Jeff explicitly
denies that the spread of Korean pride or providing experiences of things Korean are his priorities. Instead, he places the mentorship of kids and ‘just to be there for them’ as the main reasons for going to the camp. Here Jeff explicitly classifies himself within the category of ‘Korean American’ in line 38 in opposition to the category of ‘Korean’, which acquires a very specific local meaning of being linked to ‘pride’, ‘performances’, and other ‘things’ ‘Korean’. Jeff’s use of the term ‘Korean American’ allows him to distinguish himself from those who would be concerned with spreading Korean pride while positioning himself as a Korean American counselor whose main goal is to serve as a mentor to the campers. The form of his self-categorization reinforces this association between identity and ideology. While his ethnic identity is expressed in line 38 with ‘as a Korean American’, the same phrase, ‘as a X’, is used in the previous line to express his motivation for participating in the camp. In this way, he sets up an explicit link between ethnic identity and ideologies about the camp. Those who see their role as ‘Korean’ counselors are associated with Korean heritage and pride; those who see their role as ‘Korean American’ counselors are associated with the role of a mentor. These are locally defined terms that Jeff lays out, and his self-categorization differs somewhat from Ellen’s in Excerpt 1. While Ellen defines a tripartite field of oppositions, Jeff assumes an implicit and somewhat binary opposition between ‘Korean’ and ‘Korean American’ identities.

Not all cases of self-categorization are so explicit, however. Jon, like Jeff, places the ideology of mentorship in opposition to the teaching of Korean culture as the main reason why he is going to the camp. He argues that being a member of the Korean Cultural Center (or KCC) shouldn’t automatically entitle one to participate in the camp. While he doesn’t explicitly identify himself in terms of ethnic identity, like Ellen and Jeff above, Jon does classify himself in terms of what he ‘knows’ in lines 7-16 as a means of understanding his position that mentorship should take precedence over the teaching of Korean culture, and thereby indexing what Jeff would call ‘Korean American’ identity.

(3) ‘I don’t know anything about the KOREAN CULTURE’

1 Jon: You got to be able to understand what this kid wants.
2 What he needs from you.
3 What she needs from you.
4 And if you can’t do that,
5 you shouldn’t be at the camp.
6 I don’t want KCC to take this personally either but,
7 I don’t know how to play the drums,
8 but I can play the drums?
9 you know?
10 I don’t know anything about uh uh..the KOREAN CULTURE,
11 those traditions and etiquettes,
12 but I think I know something about kids.
13 I think I know what they need.
14 Because I’ve BEEN there.
15 Had those experiences.
16 And I can talk to them.
17 And tha- that’s just a- that’s just a matter of information.
While Jon recognizes that teaching drums is linked to being ‘Korean’, he challenges this association by suggesting that he himself (someone who can’t play traditional Korean drums) could go to the cultural center and learn to play. He questions why this practice must be linked to only one ethnic identity while at the same time confirming that such an association does in fact exist. He does this by taking a discussion that could have remained general, as it starts off being in lines 1-5, and making it more personal by introducing his own self-classification as relevant to the discussion. In doing so, Jon also reiterates the association made by Jeff above between ethnic identity and ideologies about the goals of the camp. While he does not self-categorize explicitly in terms of ethnic identity, in the local context, his statement, ‘I don’t know anything about Korean culture’, is understood as performatively equivalent to aligning himself with the Korean Americans. This point illustrates that self-categorization does not need to be in the explicit form of self-categorization statements in order to be locally recognized as doing self-categorization, lending more support to the position that relevance in interaction does not always need to be evidenced explicitly.

What is important to note is that there is no explicit discussion that addresses the possibility of a ‘Korean’ counselor positioning him/herself as a mentor. In fact, all the counselors who self-categorize in the course of this meeting emphasize mentorship and a less ‘Korean’ ethnic identity, which may indicate that the very practice of self-categorization is perhaps culturally specific. The relatively small group of counselors who are from KCC and who are able to teach Korean cultural heritage, for whatever reason, do not participate actively in the discussion, and it is difficult to glean whether their own self-categorizations would fall in line with particular ideas about the camp. What this suggests is that, rightly or not, some counselors conceive of the goals of the camp as an exclusive choice between emphasizing Korean heritage and mentorship. And mentorship has been constructed as a value that is removed from any sense of what Korean heritage is for these counselors. Their choices are highly personal and often resonate with their own experiences of working through ethnic identity issues. This has a strong influence on how they see their own roles as counselors and mentors for the
campers who will be attending the camp. In fact, most of the discussion takes place among counselors who speak out to challenge the notion of Korean heritage as primary to the camp, suggesting perhaps that the underlying assumption of the importance of Korean heritage does not require reiteration or confirmation on the part of the counselors. It is only the contrary view, the view that challenges the homogeneous notion of shared motivations, and by extension, shared ethnic identity, that seems to require articulation.

Furthermore, there is a conceptualization that cultural heritage is something that is somewhat ‘transmittable’: culture can be learned in the sense that knowledge (e.g. Korean language, etiquette, customs, arts) can be passed from counselor to camper in the course of this camp. While some may believe this to be true, it is not a position that is ostensibly argued. Instead, the lack of discussion about this kind of understanding indicates that this is an underlying assumption, one that those who see other viable goals for the camp struggle to defy. These counselors are, overall, more vocal, and actively construct the un(der)stated assumption that Korean identity is linked merely to cultural heritage. For these counselors, their self-categorization often takes the oppositional form of ‘Some think X, I don’t’ (e.g. Jon in Excerpt 3 above).

Counselors also see the practice of self-categorization as a means of explicitly sharing one’s sense of identity, which in turn only benefits the counselors in the preparation for the camp. One counselor in particular (Sara) who feels that they have not discussed as a group why everyone is participating in the camp initiates the discussion at the start of this meeting. She finds this to be a sign of a lack of preparation and encourages others to share their ‘stories’ (narratives of ethnic identity formation) and their own reasons for joining the camp. This suggestion is met with various responses, and is eventually implemented, but not without some resistance. Again, the most vocal members are those who seek to defy the understanding that counselors have a shared sense of ethnic identity and that cultural heritage should be a primary goal of the camp. It should be noted, too, that such a belief in the verbal expression of one’s ideological positioning is not without cultural significance in itself.

5. Self-categorization through the use of personal pronouns

Not all counselors are set on differentiating themselves from a notion of a shared ethnic identity. The camp director, Mark, finds himself somewhat in the middle of this debate and tries what he can to ‘contain’ the formulation of oppositions that may potentially divide the counselors. As director, he seeks to stress the unity among counselors and also defend his own actions (such as his decisions as to who would be cut from the counselor roster). His talk is characterized by a noticeable lack of self-categorization; in fact, Mark is very reluctant to create fields of oppositions, much less classify himself within these fields. He defends the view that the camp is about the teaching of Korean culture, which he opposes to a ‘quote unquote American culture’ in Excerpt 4, while at the same time emphasizing that Korean American motivations are equally important.

(4) ‘This quote unquote American culture’

391 Mark: Uh,
392 lot of these kids that grew up in this uh,
this quote unquote American culture,
they don’t necessarily see..certain aspects..of what Korean culture
is about.
And I’m not saying that this HPH is--
is,
uh,
uh totally Korean?
but that’s,
I think,
what we strive to do?
For six days out of a year,
I think,
we’re there to,
not only interact with the kids but maybe,
provide them the opportunity for these kids to see,
how other..Korean Americans,
or how..uh Koreans?
they interact to each other--
how they treat each other?
Uh,
maybe get to take a look at a performance or a cultural event that
they never..had a chance to see?
Maybe learn about uh,
uh,
a Korean history that they never had a chance to learn in..history in
their,
their--
uh,
junior high,
in their high school?


Mark uses the term ‘Korean’ in opposition to the ‘quote unquote American culture’ in a way that suggests an opposition of identity. In doing so, he stresses the commonalities among the counselors present. Mark’s opposition between ‘Korean’ and ‘American’ is based on the similarities that all campers and counselors share: the experience of growing up ‘Korean’ within mainstream ‘American’ society. His use of ‘Korean’ here, unlike Ellen’s, Jeff’s or Jon’s above, is based on ancestry regardless of how one behaves or perceives of oneself. For Mark, all the counselors share a common heritage despite their individual reasons for participating in the camp.

Mark also chooses his words carefully to make a distinction between Korean Americans and Koreans, recognizing that some counselors would not consider themselves to be just ‘Korean’. Throughout this excerpt, Mark makes oppositions in a very qualified way, making them and then instantly undercutting them, trying very hard not to create oppositions at all. In lines 396-399, for example, he emphasizes that Camp
HPH is not ‘totally Korean’ and then must struggle for the category he wishes to specify in lines 409-410, when talking about the way Koreans interact. He first uses ‘Korean American’, perhaps trying to be more inclusive of those who may not consider themselves exclusively ‘Korean’ in a cultural sense, but then self-repairs with the term ‘Korean’, recognizing that what he really means is the codified social behavior that Koreans engage in (referring to practices of addressing elders using special terms of address, for example) and not any kind of codified ‘Korean American’ way of interacting. This again associates Korean culture with interactional practices like using kinship terms for older peers, as in Excerpt 1 above. The hedging and repair that abound in Excerpt 4 indicate the delicate locational work in which Mark engages. While Mark does his best to diffuse any negative opposition between ‘Korean’ and ‘Korean American’ counselors, he also consciously tries to avoid classifying himself in these terms.

His difficulties in articulating the precise social categories in talking about particular groups of people betray the numerous oppositions that can be made between ‘Korean’, ‘American’, and ‘Korean American’. This is clearly seen in his use of personal pronouns. In the course of Excerpt 4, Mark switches his use of pronouns, from ‘we’ (referring to the counselors) in lines 403-406 to ‘they’ (referring to ‘Koreans’) in lines 411-412. In a recent study of national identity through discourse analysis, Wodak et al. (1999: 35) focuses on the linguistic strategies for constructing ethnicity, including the use of personal pronouns. The power of pronouns is also apparent in this excerpt as Mark encounters a discursive watershed where he must choose a pronoun to refer to the category of people who engage in a certain codified behavior. Whereas he had cast the counselors as part of one group in opposition to ‘Americans’ earlier on, his mention of ‘Korean American’ and ‘Korean’ have introduced problematic categories that force him to choose whether or not to include himself in the category, ‘Korean’. By his use of ‘they’ in lines 411-412, Mark constructs his own ethnic identity as ‘Korean American’, perhaps in order to preserve a perceived shared status among the camp counselors. By line 430, Mark returns to the use of ‘we’ to refer to the camp counselors as a group and stress their unity. The use of personal pronouns in the heritage language classroom context is also examined in He (this issue) to show how ‘we’/‘they’ are used to stress unity between the teacher and the students of the Chinese Language School. Both the teacher in the classroom context and Mark in this data use this linguistic resource as a way of constructing a group identity.

Mark’s delineation of the field of ethnic identities differs from Ellen’s tripartite opposition in Excerpt 1. His usage of the term, ‘American’, for example, has different connotations than Ellen’s usage. He uses ‘American’ in ‘this quote unquote American culture’ as a means of showing how Koreans do not fit into a mainstream American culture, whereas Ellen suggests that counselors like her can also be ‘American’. The different fields of oppositions that Mark and Ellen express illustrate that they are performing different kinds of ethnic identity in their discourse. While Mark contrasts ‘Koreans’ with ‘Americans’, counselors like Ellen express another kind of opposition which they see as relevant to the discussion, namely, the opposition between ‘Koreans’ and ‘Korean Americans’. This difference in oppositions, in addition to the actual performances of self-categorization, serves to index the diverse stances negotiated during this counselors’ meeting.
6. Ethnic identity and local meaning

While the counselors discussed above perform self-categorization is slightly different ways, I would argue that all of them do so as a means of situating themselves in terms of ethnic identity, and, by extension, as counselors who espouse a particular view of the Korean camp. The counselors accomplish this through different levels of explicitness. In a ‘scale of explicitness’, Jeff and Ellen are perhaps the most explicit in their self-categorization as ‘American’ and ‘Korean American’, respectively. Jon positions himself more implicitly, using the locally accomplished association between mentorship and Korean American identity as a means of classifying himself. Because this association is accomplished in the discourse, Jon’s self-categorization, though implicit, can clearly be understood as a case of identity performance. Mark is perhaps the most implicit in his self-categorization due to his interest in avoiding explicit oppositional categories in general.

The data analyzed above have shown that counselors participating in this Korean camp have diverse notions of ethnic identity that are performed discursively in interaction. While engaging in talk about the goals of the camp and the motivations for counselors to participate, these views become indexically linked to notions of ethnic identity to the extent that a ‘Korean American’ counselor (as opposed to a ‘Korean’ counselor) can be said to espouse particular beliefs about the goals of the camp and motivations for participating. The fact that the term ‘Korean’ is used in such diverse ways and in opposition to various categories has shown that what the term ‘Korean’ comes to mean can be very specific to the local context. The context in which linguistic practices become associated with particular acts and stances becomes a site for the construction of ideologies that contribute to the various meanings of ‘Korean’. Through the practice of self-categorization, counselors locally construct a sense of ethnic identity that challenges notions of homogeneity within an ethnic category.

References


Kang, M. Agnes, and Adrienne Lo Ms. Two ways of articulating heterogeneity in Korean American narratives of ethnic identity.

