

Hypersubjectivity

Language, anxiety, and indexical dissonance in globalization

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This commentary responds to papers in a special issue on “Anxiety, Insecurity, and Border Crossing: Language Contact in a Globalizing World.” The discussion considers how anxiety emerges as transnational subjects seek semiotic stability in the global economy’s shifting terrain of indexical relations. Although contact zones informed by neoliberalism valorize linguistic flexibility, they also hierarchize certain kinds of communicative competence as more flexible than others. When linguistic practice is divorced from its temporal and spatial roots, it is readily essentialized as indexical of particular kinds of personhood, only some of which are viewed as appropriately global. The ambiguity of what counts as linguistic capital in the global economy leads speakers to defend their behaviors through appeals to authenticity, often confirming the very ideology that positions them as linguistically inflexible.

Keywords: anxiety, communicative competence, globalization, identity, indexicality, language, linguistic flexibility, linguistic insecurity, neoliberalism, subjectivity, superdiversity, transnationalism, zombie categories

Commentary

A new wave of sociolinguistic scholarship organized under the concept of superdiversity examines the linguistic effects of accelerated globalization in late capitalism: the hybrid languages associated with an increasingly influential globalized middle class in developing nations; the digital vernaculars that arise as new communication technologies alter the usual patterns of language spread; the mixed forms that develop when global media carries language across national boundaries. The contributions to this special issue of the *Journal of Asian Pacific Communication* remind us that these linguistic shifts, embedded within a

neoliberalism that prioritizes certain ways of speaking over others, also have profound effects on speaker subjectivity. Over the past several decades, sociolinguists and linguistic anthropologists have amply illustrated how identity is constituted through the creation of semiotic links between linguistic form and social meaning, a process known as indexicality (for reviews, see Bucholtz & Hall 2004, 2005, 2008; Hall 2013). The current set of papers, drawing from zones of language contact in Hawai'i, Japan, Singapore, and Korea, illustrate how identity is destabilized by the metalinguistic awareness of this same process. The transnational reconfiguration of media, migration, and markets brings together in new intensity not just a diversity of language forms, but also the conflicting meanings of those forms as perceived by the diverse groups who speak and hear them. My commentary thus considers how anxiety, the compelling topic of this special issue, emerges within the indexical dissonance that is the linguistic fallout of global movement.

Anxiety has rarely been the focus of sociolinguistic work on globalization, even though it is in many ways the cornerstone of contemporary globalization theory. Several of the most cited social theorists writing about globalization today — Giddens, Bauman, Beck, Castells — describe in great detail the fracturing of identity that occurs when global processes disturb established patterns of employment, family, gender, neighborhood, and nation. In fact, the insecurity that arises when subjectivity is dislodged from the usual coordinates of time and space is for these theorists a defining feature of late capitalism. For Giddens (1991), the experience of living in late modernity is like riding a runaway “juggernaut” that has no steering. Bauman (2000, 2006) uses the metaphor of “liquid modernity” to capture the ambivalence and insecurity brought about by the decline of state-run social institutions. Beck, Bonss, and Lau (2003) describe the individualized agent of second modernity as a “quasi-subject” who must create fictive narratives of self in order to achieve an apparition of stability. Castells (2009) outlines the types of identity-building projects undertaken by subjects in a network society to secure meaning and communal feeling in a new order of uncertainty. For all of these authors, the demise of the nation-state under neoliberalism compels subjects to become increasingly individualized as the masters of their own destiny — the impossibility of which produces instability, fear, and, of course, anxiety.

The portrait of identity that emerges in these grand-scale narratives of globalization is admittedly far too unified for the way identity is treated in sociocultural linguistics. The microanalysis of discourse reveals that identity is both emergent in interaction and contextualized within particularized social histories — a point often lost in texts addressing larger political economic processes. Yet the theme of individualization that runs across these theories is useful to think with, especially for the analysis of anxiety as an empirical reality. For these scholars, the openness that constitutes a new global order — whether termed late modernity

(Giddens), liquid modernity (Bauman), second modernity (Beck), or network society (Castells) — has intensified not just the subject's capacity to recognize the constructed nature of subjectivity; this was also the case in a simpler modernity driven by the ideal of national progress. Rather, the dismantling of boundaries that defined a previous age has transformed subjectivity into a property of the individual instead of collective, shifting the responsibility of survival to projects of self-making instead of social institutions. This is a noted feature of neoliberal global reforms. As a number of sociocultural linguists have argued, language is likewise reinterpreted in this process as a technical skill that can enhance one's individual position in the new global economy (e.g., Cameron 2005; Heller 2003, 2010; Urciuoli 2008). This heightened attention to self as the source and author of social, economic, and linguistic capital in many ways inspires the anxieties that frame the papers in this special issue. In the intensification of language contact that is the inevitable outcome of global movement, speakers become increasingly aware not just of the multiplicity of indexical links that constitute identity, but also of the necessity (and for some, the impossibility) of managing these links for personal gain.

Throughout this discussion, I use the term *hypersubjectivity* as shorthand for this anxious state of affairs. If superdiversity explains the state of language under intensified globalization, as a number of linguists have argued (Blommaert 2010; Blommaert & Rampton 2011), then hypersubjectivity may be its corollary for the state of identity. The articles in this special issue provide vivid accounts of the special attention — or rather, hyperattention — given to indexical relations as speakers strive to find semiotic stability in the language contact situations that have come to characterize late capitalism (see also Hall & Nilep forthcoming). Bae relays the emotion-laden stories of middle class South Korean families who give up hearth and home and relocate to Singapore so that their children can learn a more globally competitive variety of English. Hiramoto describes the tensions experienced by 'local' Hawaiians as residents of white ancestry and newer immigrants appropriate traditional Polynesian and Asian tattoo patterns for purposes of global fashion instead of heritage. Furukawa examines how celebrity contestants on two popular Japanese game shows participate in comedy skits that mock their mistakes in English as "idiocy." Said-Sirhan reveals the unease experienced by lower income minority Malays in Singapore when they try to assert themselves as entrepreneurs while maintaining community expectations of verbal humility. And finally, Park shows us how anxiety materializes across the speech of a Korean businessman who is denied a promotion for not speaking "native-like" English in his company's Singapore headquarters, even when it was his fluency in English that enabled his success in Korea. Caught between a rock and a hard place — or what Bauman (2000) might call a rock and a liquid place — the protagonists in these essays

experience language as anchored in communal identity when a globalizing world increasingly views it as flexible commodity.

The kinds of indexical clashes discussed in these articles are undoubtedly familiar to those of us who conduct ethnographic work in the language contact zones associated with the new global economy. In my own research among groups associated with globally funded NGOs in urban India, for example, indexical dissonance regarding the social meanings ascribed to Hindi and English is a central component of everyday interaction (Hall 2005, 2009). English in India has long been viewed as a carrier of elite Western-originating values, given its status as the postcolonial tongue of an educated middle class. But this perception has intensified with the rise of India's global economy, with diverse processes of globalization working to sediment the status of English as indexical of modernity, and more specifically, sexual modernity. In the technology and communication industries that have boosted the status and scope of India's globalized middle classes, English is not just a ticket to upward mobility: It is also an attitude, a style, a way of being in the world, a projection of progressive ideas about gender and sexuality, a declaration of cosmopolitan subjectivity. When new inductees into India's expanding middle classes attempt to enter these global industries, they come to realize — sometimes painfully as the butt of another's joke — that acquiring competence in these indexical readings of English and Hindi are just as important to upward mobility as the linguistic proficiency they learned in school. Mastering grammatical rules is one thing, but mastering a rapidly evolving hierarchy of relations between form and meaning is quite another, especially when those relations are contrary to one's sense of self.

In the flux of indexical relations that characterize the contact zones of late capitalism, semiotic stability is at best a fleeting achievement. But this instability also explains why speakers become so invested in defending it. What the contexts explored in these papers all have in common — a multi-national corporation (Park), transnational education (Bae), a global marketplace (Hiramoto), an entrepreneurial self-help group (Said-Sirhan), a cosmopolitan game show (Furukawa) — is that indexicality is in many ways unmoored from the social categories that are the lynchpins of meaning-making in the nation-state. The usual suspects of class, race, gender, culture, and language have become what Beck (2002) would call the “zombie categories” of second modernity — still circulating, perhaps dangerously so, but transformed in a way that is largely unrecognizable. In these new global playing fields, where form-meaning relations follow the whims of neoliberal flexibility, subjectivity itself is called into question.

Over the past decade, linguists engaged in research on globalization have proposed that the Hymesian concept of communicative competence, still central to research on second language acquisition, must be either abandoned or revised

to account for the shifting terrain of form-meaning relations that characterizes sociality in the new global order (e.g. Canagarajah 2007; Kataoka, Ikeda, & Besnier 2013; Kramsch & Whiteside 2008; Makoni & Pennycook 2007; among many others). Scholars have debated whether Hymes's (2001[1967]) formulation of this concept allows for emergent and creative uses of language (see, for example, Cazden 2011), but his focus on stable communities as the site in which socially appropriate uses of language are learned and mastered necessarily advances an understanding of indexicality as static instead of dynamic. The critique of communicative competence thus extends a previous decade's concern with the concept of the speech community (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 1992; Pratt 1987; Rampton 1998; Silverstein 1998), a parallel unit of analysis that similarly assumes consensus regarding links between form and meaning. Current research in sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology has been highly effective at challenging these stable projections of community. Work on style as metasemiotic activity, for instance, brings indexical flux and negotiation to the fore of analysis (for reviews, see Bucholtz forthcoming; Coupland 2007), particularly with respect to hierarchies of race, gender, and sexuality in youth culture. The same could be said of newer work on communicative competence, which analyzes it as a product of discursive negotiation as much as socialization. For instance, research on a variety of multilingual contexts reveals that speakers enact, debate, and challenge what counts as communicative competence, even performing different models of competence as part of identity work (Besnier 2013; Chun 2004; Lo & Kim 2012; Jaffe 2000; Rampton 1999; Woolard 1998; see Jaffe 2013 for a review). Communicative competence is thus not just a set of language skills; it is also an ideological formulation that is readily associated with communal figures of personhood.

This is where things get tricky in the neoliberal marketplaces that are the focus of many of these articles. Although these multilingual environments valorize an individualized and free-floating linguistic flexibility, the semiotic practices of the speakers they harbor are inevitably bound to situated communities. Neoliberal ideology leads these speakers to believe that they will be rewarded for hard work, regardless of where they come from, yet it nevertheless prioritizes certain kinds of communicative competence as more flexible than others. Because these hierarchies are never specified, they are difficult to challenge. Language proficiency may certainly be at issue, but it too is a vague determination, dependent on the ears of an unnamed beholder. What becomes crucially important is this: Once communicative competence is divorced from its temporal and spatial roots, it is readily essentialized as indexical of particular kinds of personhood, only some of which are viewed as appropriately global. When the protagonists of these essays seek mobility in the global economy, they rely on the models of competence that brought them success at home. Yet the form-meaning relations they bring

to these new environments, even if rewarded within nation-bound categories of gender, ethnicity, and social class, often become reanimated as personal liability. The ambiguity of what counts as symbolic capital in these global contact zones in turn leads speakers to defend their language practices as indexical of an authenticity they cannot shake. In this sense, communicative competence is also a zombie category, here transformed into a highly stereotyped version of its former self.

I am reminded of the narrative told by Shin, the disillusioned protagonist of Park's excellent essay on linguistic insecurity in transnational work. Of the contributions to this special issue, Park's discussion most clearly situates anxiety in the tensions that arise between national and neoliberal understandings of the relationship between language and identity. Although Shin was a successful mid-level manager in his home country of Korea, he confronts a more ambivalent layout of symbolic capital when he moves to his company's regional headquarters in Singapore. In this international workplace, his Korean-inflected English, prestigious within the context of Korea, is reevaluated as inferior to other varieties of Asian English for reasons that are never articulated. Labov's (1966) understanding of linguistic insecurity, given its reliance on a speaker's reflexive ability as a citizen of the state to recognize the variants that constitute prestige, is not easily applied to the ambiguity of this situation. This is a different kind of linguistic insecurity, one born from a metalinguistic awareness that these variants will never be known. Park thus locates anxiety as emergent from indexical dissonance instead of consensus. When Shin narrates how he lost a promotion to an Indian national, he is also narrating his inability to reconcile flexible and authentic understandings of language. This conflict is succinctly captured by the expression that Park has selected for the title of his essay, "You say ouch and I say *aya*." These are Shin's words, reportedly said to his supervisor after being informed that he lost the promotion for lacking "native-like" English (whatever this may mean). Once Shin realizes that a defense of his own English is impossible given the ambiguity of what constitutes competence in this international business environment, he resorts to a defense based on authenticity. His supervisor may be able to display the linguistic flexibility that is expected in this neoliberal marketplace — crying "ouch" in English when he suffers pain — but Shin will always use language as a reflex, quite literally, of his Koreanness.

Bae's essay analyzes a similar predicament in the discourses of parents who try to save their children from the linguistic glass ceiling experienced by nationals like Shin. Here, we are reminded that neoliberal self-making is also a family affair. Since the 1997 Asian financial crisis, the Korean middle class has increasingly countered its own insecurity by shouldering responsibility for the economic viability of their children. Central to this shift has been the prioritization of foreign language learning: A new generation of Korean families are moving to

multilingual environments like Singapore — the site of Bae’s research — in the hope of remaking their children into global elites. In her analysis of the narratives of parents who have chosen this path, we come to realize that the neoliberal expectation of endless flexibility requires constant proof of that flexibility, a demand that straps the families she studies to an anxiety that is never resolved. The parents have multilingual competence as their destination, but the road they follow erases their origins and leads their children to a linguistic limbo that is neither here nor there. Like other immigrant groups across the world, these transnationals have developed a hyperawareness of the complex relationship between language, place, and subjectivity: They cannot return to Korea because their children’s Korean is no longer good enough to excel in the Korean educational system; they cannot stay in Singapore because their children will never be recognized as sufficiently Singaporean; and they cannot place their children in a western university without validation from at least one of the above. Most of all, they are immobilized by the realization that the quest for linguistic flexibility has prevented their children from acquiring the native linguistic competence that they now view as essential to Korean national identity. These are the lived and distressing consequences of what Bae aptly calls “the fierce pursuit of neoliberal subjectivity.” Speakers rush to pursue a global identity without realizing the complexities of what they will have to give up. The new global economy may have ushered in a divorce of language and nation, but much of the world still sees these two as intimately connected.

As a case in point, consider the indexical defensiveness voiced by Hawai‘i locals regarding the meaning of traditional Polynesian tattoo patterns, the subject of Hiramoto’s essay. For the tattoo wearers she interviews in Honolulu, body adornment, like the use of Hawai‘i Creole, is a manifestation of one’s mixed-race heritage: The choice of design must be both racially and linguistically accurate to reflect the specifics of a family lineage forged through adversity. But a new brand of tattoo wearers, many of them of white ancestry, have taken to these patterns and the non-Roman scripts associated with them with no regard for personal accuracy. For them, the appropriation of these ethnic motifs is, quite simply, cool: a fashionable display of a cosmopolitan sensibility. Both groups are engaged in the neoliberal commodification of identity that John and Jean Comaroff (2009) have cleverly labeled “Ethnicity, Inc.” After all, tradition is as much an invention as modernity: Even the most local of locals lack mastery in the symbolism they purport to own. Yet the tattoos of these two groups, no matter how similar in form, vary at the level of social meaning, with one group’s authenticity being another group’s cool.

In fact, now that the ethnic boundaries of island identity are obscured by the continued escalation of tourism, immigration, and intermarriage, the meaning that one attributes to a tattoo can by itself constitute one’s status as local or non-local. As the foreign-born share of the Hawaiian population approaches 20 percent,

locals have become newly invested in wearing their heritage on their sleeves, as it were. Now that these displays are available to all through processes of commodification, identity must be demonstrated at the level of meaning in addition to form. To bring this back to the rich set of interviews analyzed by Hiramoto: Anyone, with a little research, can choose a pattern of centipede scales at the base of a coconut tree, but Andy's explanation of this image as reflecting a Filipino heritage bound in Hawaiian roots makes him into a local. The essentialization of identity produced through this semiotic work will inevitably have its effects on the larger field of indexical relations that inform everyday interaction in Honolulu. Hiramoto provides only the local side of the scenario in this essay, but one imagines that non-locals may also learn to narrate indigeneity in the tattoos they have chosen, especially if a claim of authenticity can make a cool tattoo even cooler (for non-local viewpoints, see Hiramoto 2014).

The previous papers locate anxiety in the reflexive narratives of hypersubjects whose sense of self has been undermined by neoliberal relations of form and meaning. The final two articles by Said-Sirhan and Furukawa focus on interaction as the site in which these indexical tensions are forged and negotiated. Said-Sirhan's analysis of small-group interaction in a micro-business training program brings us back to Singapore, a highly regulated state that nevertheless promotes an ideology of meritocracy to curtail arguments for social welfare. Lower class Malays experience the effects of this ideology in their everyday lives, as they are repeatedly reminded that they alone are responsible for their socioeconomic marginalization. But even as they counter the stereotype of the lazy Malay by joining the entrepreneurial self-help programs that are the subject of Said-Sirhan's essay, they can never quite display the confident English that is viewed as the kickstand of upward mobility. Said-Sirhan attributes this to a conflict between the social meanings that these women attribute to English and communal expectations regarding the expression of humility. For the Malay-speaking women who participate in these seminars, English is indexically tied to the educated Singaporean upper classes. Its use by members of the community is therefore read as arrogant and pretentious, if not rude, qualities that are incompatible with the discursive humility expected of these Malay women.

In many ways, this is an old story for minority speakers everywhere, where the display of proficiency in the national standard often goes against community-based expectations regarding the relationship between language and identity. But in Singapore, the situation is additionally complicated by the existence of two dominant varieties of English that are themselves indexically opposed: a globally oriented Standard Singapore English and a locally oriented Singapore Colloquial English or Singlish (Alsagoff 2010). Even if these Malay speakers manage to speak English in a way that is viewed as assertive — avoiding, for instance, the

incorporation of Malay pronouns as hedges — they still lack the ability to distinguish these two English varieties and the contrasting social meanings they project. Their use of Singlish to signal their entrepreneurial aspirations in this formal business context inspires laughter, not praise. Said-Sirhan's essay thus provides a troubling portrait of the effects of neoliberal language ideology on already marginalized speakers. In short, the knowledge needed to display proficiency in these indexical uses of language cannot be acquired through personal ambition alone.

Such work reminds us that indexical dissonance materializes in the ever shifting back and forth of interaction. While these authors have provided us with still snapshots of form-meaning relations in particular times and spaces, the evolving contours of people, language, and markets in the global contact zones they analyze insure that indexical stability is only temporary. For this reason, the groups who benefit most from particular arrangements of form and meaning must continuously reaffirm the value of these linkages. This is what makes Furukawa's work on the mediatization of linguistic anxiety in Japan a critical contribution to this special issue. In the two popular Japanese television programs that are the subject of his essay, celebrity elites are overtly mocked for making mistakes in English. There is nothing subtle about these parodies. Indeed, in the show called *Mecha Mecha Iketeru* ('Totally Totally Cool'), low scoring competitors are given titles based on the Japanese term *baka*, or 'idiot.' Furukawa illustrates how anxieties regarding English are accentuated by a variety of overlaid special effects that range from chimes and buzzers to flashing O's and X's. One of his most memorable examples involves a segment called "English Brain Tower" on the quiz show *Nepuriigu* ('Nep League'), which creates the illusion of different groups of contestants riding in side-by-side elevators. When a group provides the correct English translation of a Japanese term, they go up; when they fail, they go down. This is a brazen metaphor of upward mobility: The display of English expertise takes these Japanese speakers higher and higher up the socioeconomic skyscraper.

This begs the question: What makes these performances so extraordinarily funny to Japanese audiences? Certainly, these shows tap into viewer anxieties over escalating demands for English in a globalizing Japan. But the dramatized reactions of individual contestants — such as Shigemori, who breaks into tears when she learns that she is the lowest score holder on an English exam — would suggest that this anxiety is as much performed as it is felt. When I watch *American Idol*, a game show similarly dedicated to the public humiliation of its contestants, I do not know whether a Brooklyn-accented opera singer is for real or not. What I do know is that the show is invested in producing her as real and in subsequently assessing her reality as inferior. The valorization of particular kinds of indexical interpretations — in this case, English as intelligent, as upwardly mobile, as an antidote to idiocy, even as "totally totally cool" — serves those classes who have

the resources to excel in a global economy that is increasingly based in English. As with other protagonists in these essays, Shigemori defends her inability to navigate this terrain by invoking authenticity, although for her it has to do with cognition instead of community. When her viewers accuse her of “pretending to be stupid,” she counters that she is “just an idiot” in everyday life too. Her defense thus affirms the show’s linking of English competence to an individualized intelligence. If neoliberal ideology naturalizes success in English language learning as an internal human quality (Park 2010), it does the same with failure.

The essays in this special issue give empirical depth to the anxieties experienced by transnational subjects who move across the linguistic fixities associated with previous generations. We are left with a collective portrait of the emotional consequences of neoliberal mobility for those who pursue it: the Korean businessman who loses a promotion for linguistic deficiencies that are never specified; the Korean family who earns their child’s multilingualism at the expense of national identity; the lower class Malay whose attempts at entrepreneurial self-assertion are met with laughter; the Hawai’i local who sees his ethnic heritage worn as a fashion statement on the arms of others; the Japanese contestant who breaks into tears when her English is publicly mocked on television primetime. Hypersubjectivity emerges in these neoliberal contexts as speakers become reflexively aware that the form-meaning relations they rely on to make sense of their own lives are viewed as personal liability. The ambiguity of what counts as linguistic capital in the global economy makes it impossible for speakers to defend themselves on grounds of linguistic proficiency. Instead, they turn to authenticity as a better explanation for their language behavior, often confirming the very ideology that positions them as linguistically inflexible.

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