The Semiotics of Global Koreanness

Taking a Peirce-inspired approach to social meaning-making, this colloquium explores sets of signs – icons, indices, and symbols – and related sign relations which enable the construction of contemporary global ideas of 'Koreanness'. Through presentations which touch on a range of semiotic objects and modes, from scripts to linguistic markers and body images, the colloquium seeks to reconstruct the ideological matrix which gives rise to social artefacts, actions, and identities globally or locally attributed or discursively linked to Korea. This may include discussion of how signs from the past have become (re)interpreted as contemporary markers of identity, or diachronic studies looking at the formation of these meaning-making processes. More broadly, the colloquium examines the nature of the global/local interface, identifying the circular processes by which the local is resignified into the global and vice versa. Through presentations and a follow-up roundtable, the presenters provide a transdisciplinary account of produced 'Koreanness', and discuss the potential future directions of Global Korea, and the signs that will pave its way.

1. "Hangeulize this": Script as a semiotic resource in the construction of global Koreanness

Eldin Milak**, *Curtin University*

In this talk, I map out the trajectory by which Hangeul has come to function as a semiotic resource for the construction of a global Korean identity, as predicated on locally practiced forms of script-Koreanness. Building on the discussion of the historical rise of Hangeul through the writings of Ju Si-gyeong, I position Hangeul within the national development project of South Korea, theorizing it as one of the four central elements of the nation-state, alongside 'language', 'people', and 'land'. I label this fourfold construct the 'Junian Tetrad' (a reworking of the 'Herderian Triad') and explore how it evolved from its earliest formulations in Ju's 'Grammar of the National Language' (국어문법, 2010) to its contemporary manifestations in the policies and practices of the Korean state and the globally imagined Korean nation. Triangulating the data obtained from contemporary physical and digital landscapes and historical document analysis with a discursive study of the public laws and legislations enforced in Seoul, I exemplify how Hangeul, as a semiotic resource with linguistic potential, is deployed in the construction and maintenance of local and global forms of Koreanness. By discussing the sets of processes which allow for the (de)linking of Hangeul and the Korean language, I further illustrate how script can be used to construct and circumscribe audiences, delimit access to information and content, and regulate the public visual conception of identity. I conclude the talk by arguing that such symbolic power is derived from a set of co-constructed paradoxical principles, which allow for the consolidation and simultaneous deployment of dialectically opposed concepts, such as 'preservation' (보전) and 'development' (발전).

2. Multimodal indexicals of politeness and power as contested markers of global Koreanness

Lucien Brown, Monash University

This talk discusses the emergence of verbal and non-verbal markers of politeness and power as disputed sites of notions of Koreanness within overseas Korean communities, focusing on Korean populations in Australia. The indexical markers that I discuss include widely researched politeness markers such as grammaticised honorifics and address terms, as well as non-verbal markers including bowing, using double-handed gestures, and maintaining erect body posture. In addition, I consider emergent markers of power and status in overseas Korean communities including English ability, length of residence, and visa status. By analysing these clusters of indexicals, I demonstrate how markers of politeness and power are involved in ongoing conflicts and negotiations regarding the notions of Korean identity, which are simultaneously both positively and negatively valenced. Social actors within Korean overseas communities tread a tightrope between maintaining essentialised aspects of Korean identities, while simultaneously questioning aspects of such identities that are perceived as being in conflict with local values, and/or with changes in South Korean society. I contend that this balance is maintained via dynamic mixing of semiotic practices that continuously work to position and reposition notions of politeness and power.

3. Global 'Koreanness and the K-pop Aesthetic as a Consumable Style

Joanna Elfving-Hwang, Curtin University

This presentation examines how the somatic aspects of K-pop aesthetics, and in particular stage aesthetics, have emerged as recognisable signs of authentic 'global Koreanness'. While the use of cosmetics, fashion and other technologies of the body such as fillers and cosmetic surgery are rarely associated with ideas of bodily authenticity, in this representation I will be examining the ways in which the K-pop and K-beauty aesthetics more broadly have emerged as a recognisable style, and consider how the semiotics of the body on stage for global gaze intersect with both cultural nationalism and 'authentic global Koreanness' that renders nationalism palatable for global consumption. Scholars have previously argued that for various forms of Korean culture to appeal to overseas audiences as both a cultural export for profit (and a soft power tool), the product itself had had to evolve into a consumable object regardless of their own cultural background or nationality (Shim 2008; Elfving-Hwang 2013), a process which has allowed which allows the audiences to inscribe multiple meanings to it through the process of consumption (Yoon 2017; Min 2022; Oh, 2017; Kang 2023) while maintaining aspects of domestic cultural nationalism to retain recognisable forms of 'Koreanness' (Koo & Koo, 2022). Other scholars have noted how the hybrid use of elements from traditional Korean culture in music videos or recognisably *Korean* K-pop idols in cosmetics advertising have increased the appeal of these visual aesthetics with both domestic and overseas consumers (Saeji, 2020; Willoughby, 2022; Maliangkay, 2022; Kim, 2022). This presentation will therefore consider the question of what 'global Koreanness' looks like as a consumable object for global consumption, and whether Korean beauty aesthetics, as expressed through pop culture, contribute to global beauty aesthetics or simply represent a local expression of existing beauty ideals in local contexts. As Korean men's and women's bodies in Korean popular culture are presented as gendered, desirable yet racialized symbols of national identity, is there potential for this aesthetic to challenge global beauty cultures and ideals are racialized, dominated by white middle class beauty in the industrial West?

4. **The World Without Honorifics: The reconstruction of Korean honorifics in the discourse of globalism**

Eunseon Kim, *Australian National University*

This article explores how some native Koreans use Korean honorifics (KH) as an overt topic to suggest the new "Koreaness" in the discourse of globalism. The honorifics system in Korean has been often understood as one of the prominent emblems of Korean culture. However, the discourse of globalism has put the cultural value of KH into question. The recent discussions over how to square KH with the idea of globalism highlight the stigmatization of KH as "dishonorable honorifics" (Koyama 1997). They advocate discarding honorific markers and use plain speech without honorifics instead, arguing Korean society cannot get away with the use of honorifics to keep up with the era of globalisation. On the basis of the metapragmatic accounts of KH in print and digital media, this article analyses how the cosmopolitan reformers envision and promote the Korean society without honorifics. Drawing upon Peirce's semiotic theory on signification or representation of signs, I explain that discarding honorifics and its link to the idea of a global Korean society are rationalised through the positive stereotypification of honorifics and the positive stereotypification of plain speech. I also draw attention to the disregarded aspects of honorific and plain styles which are rarely talked about because they do not Yit the imagined world without honorifics. While the critical discourse of KH reinforces the characterization of the linguistic practice in the perpetual framework of power relations, the ignored pragmatic functions of KH suggest understanding what sustains the use of honorifics in Korean society requires a more comprehensive recognition of language use than mere stereotypes. Lastly, I consider how the sociolinguistic phenomena constructed by the language users' ideas about their language practice may contribute to language change: Will KH disappear when Korea enters an egalitarian society? Will globalisation collapse KH?

5. **Do you know 'the love'?: Translanguaging Across the Semiotic Landscape of Korean Media**

Bumyong Choi, Emory University

Hakyoon Lee, Georgia State University

This study investigates the dynamic and creative translanguaging practices within the semiotic landscapes of Korean media, encompassing TV shows, internet broadcasts, and social network services. Focusing on languages (English and Sino-Korean) and semiotic resources, we aim to decipher the motivations behind these practices and their impact on the global-local discourse of Koreanness. Adopting a social-constructivist perspective, we consider language ideologies as interpretive frames (Ricento, 2000; Kroskrity, 2004), and building upon the notion of translanguaging as a creative act (Li Wei, Tsang, Wong, & Lock, 2020; Zhang & Ren, 2020), this study explores the social functions of semiotic landscapes in Korean contexts. We analyze 56 images captured between August 2019 and December 2021, examining visual and discursive resources, including subtitles, text balloons, and signs. Our findings reveal that translanguaging within these semiotic landscapes serves various functions beyond information conveyance, including branding, reframing, redefining, mitigation, and substitution. These practices highlight how media acts as a space, where language ideologies are both appropriated and perpetuated. We argue that these creative tactics, linguistic play, and subversive acts foster multilingual repertoires and imbue linguistic practices with new significance, driven by the forces of globalization. This phenomenon exemplifies the semiotic landscapes of a multicultural Korea. In exploring the interplay of visual and discursive resources, this study contributes to the formation of a distinct identity in the global-local discourse of Koreanness. Our research thus sheds light on the complex relationship between translanguaging, semiotic landscapes, and the evolving global-local identity of Korea, providing valuable insights into the juncture of language, media, and cultural identity.

6. De/reconstructing Koreanness: The role of Korean language use

Mi Yung Park, University of Auckland

In this presentation, I will discuss how the Korean language signifies different social meanings in terms of (lack of) belonging. Drawing on examples from two data sets collected through interviews with North Korean refugees and transnational bilingual returnees respectively, I will show how using different Korean language varieties leads to different constructions of "Koreanness", which are both imposed on the one hand and agentic on the other. The first example involves the different images of Koreanness associated with the North and South varieties of Korean. Although the two varieties are mutually intelligible, 70 years of separation has resulted in noticeable differences. As a result, a certain linguistic identity has been imposed on North Korean refugees to South Korea as inferior Korean speakers. Some North Korean refugees struggled to develop positive identities. However, others agentively chose to preserve their North Korean accent to maintain their identities and to differentiate themselves from South Koreans as a bidialectal Korean, in the context of reunification. The second example involves early-study abroad (ESA) university students who have returned to South Korea after studying in the United States. On their return, they were considered privileged due to their bilingualism. However, bilingual competence was also simultaneously negatively ascribed as an example of their insufficient Koreannness. This has led some of the ESA students to practice and use Koreanized English pronunciation and not to mix English words into Korean, which was a revealing factor for a different kind of Koreanness. Yet, they strategically showcased their native-like English proYiciency in certain settings. As such, different varieties and elements of the Korean language clearly have differing symbolic value and thus contribute to different perceptions of Koreanness. Moreover, socialization for speakers of different varieties of Korean involves complexity, multiplicity, and active ongoing negotiation in terms of language use, ideologies, and identities.

7. Discussion: The Semiotics of Global Koreanness

Nicholas Harkness, Harvard University

The way "into" language and the way "out of" language are the same: indexicality. The way from the "micro" of situated usage to the "macro" of variation, circulation, and change is also the same: indexicality. A working knowledge of indexicality, made methodologically operational through the framework of metapragmatics, allows scholars to systematically derive semiotic genera (=legisigns) from indexically anchored events of communication, some of which may seem unique to language, and some of which may seem more broadly sociocultural in nature. *Ritual* and *emblem* describe two ways that indexical function combines with iconic function to stabilize and shape events of semiosis in relation to institutional centers, higher-order cosmologies, and wider scales of interdiscursive circulation. The papers presented under the title of "The Semiotics of Global Koreanness" deal centrally with this problem, following the metapragmatic trajectories of script, verbal and non-verbal forms of deference and demeanor, formalized linguistic honorifics, multimodal media texts, and the varieties of Korean language itself from site-specific contexts of use to broadly global projections of "Korea" qua attribute, property, or essence. Ultimately, they seek to explain the generative indexical processes that seem to authorize "Koreanness" as a global semiotic force.