COMMENTARY: PERSPECTIVE AND THE POLITICS OF REPRESENTATION

Susan Gal

These papers provide an embarrassment of riches for the commentator. The cases are described with a wealth of ethnographic and textual detail. The analyses rightly attend to phenomena at quite different scales: We learn about linguistic utterances and their immediate co-texts of talk, but there is also evidence about broader and broader contexts. The papers discuss the speech events in which talk occurs, the genres represented, the responses of listeners, the institutional sites at which the talk occurred, the ethnic categories invoked and the discursive field of other social categories within which the they gain their meanings, as well as the political economic positions of the speakers. "Asian American" is never analyzed in isolation from contrasting identity-labels to which it is culturally opposed. Indeed, each of these three papers succeeds in describing a complex, regionally and institutionally specific configuration of ethnic, gender and occupational categories. The "relationality" and localism of ethnic categories is admirably demonstrated.

Furthermore, Chun, Labrador and Shankar nicely complicate the usual sociolinguistic paradigm that assumes linguistic forms to be indexical of speakers' identities. Indexicality is fundamental, to be sure. But in the cases presented here, there is no simple relationship between the demographic category to which speakers might be taken to belong (e.g. in a census) and the forms of speech they deploy. Rather, cultural categories of identity and the linguistic forms that index them are seen to be performed, enacted, evoked, sometimes by speakers who claim them as their "own" and sometimes by others. Bakhtin called these the "stylizations" or "typifications" through which speakers regularly and necessarily "ventriloquate" their own social positions and that of others. Moreover, linguistic forms are differentially keyed or voiced as serious or ironic, parodic, or playful. The linguistic skills required vary a great deal. The authors imply that, depending on the linguistic ideologies in play, a single phonological feature can function to evoke the ethnolinguistic stereotype, or the evocation may require a combination of cues, or even some ability to reproduce and understand whole interactional scenes. Chun, Labrador and Shankar also take up the possible social consequences of enacting or voicing ethnolinguistic stereotypes in particular ways. This is a more complex notion of "performativity." It is not the same as simply performing an identity, but rather ritually *creates* – in somewhat the same way as the making of a promise does – some new social reality. So, one might ask, when does the use of stereotyped linguistic forms create solidarity? When does it homogenize or denigrate its objects? How might it hide racist attitudes beneath claims of multiculturalism?

Rather than further reiterating the many fine arguments made by the papers, I would like to use my role as commentator to extend the conversation by considering

briefly some of the analytical questions that emerge when the three papers are read against each other. Let me start with *the politics of representation*, and then discuss mass mediated *perspectives*.

The papers propose and discuss labels such as "Mock Asian" "Mock Filipino," and "South Asian American," as well as terms such as "Korean" "Filipino" "desi" "Indian" "Tamil" and "Local." First, some of these evoke connections to linguistic labels, while others, such as "desi" and "Local" do not. It would be interesting to know how this is significant from a sociolinguistic perspective. Are there language ideologies at stake here, ones that sometimes focus speakers' attention on linguistic provenance and sometimes erase such linkages? Second, as Chun, Labrador and Shankar carefully note, some of the labels are used by the speakers described, while others are proposed by the ethnographers for analytical purposes. What are the implications of the "mock" label for analytical purposes? And are they only analytical? Hill's stimulating coinage of "Mock Spanish" remains important and challenging, but also perhaps specific to the position of Spanish and Spanish speakers in the United States. It might be equally useful to examine the very notion and nature of linguistic stereotyping itself – the process that produces "Mock Spanish" among other possible forms – rather than simply extending the term to all practices that typify and evoke social groups through linguistic means. Since stereotypes of groups are always part of a structure of oppositional images within some political context, one would expect linguistic typifications to build on contrasting images and thus to differ in their effects.

As the editors of this Special Issue have pointed out, to publish a set of essays on "Asian American" speech is itself a political act aimed at encouraging research about social groups apparently neglected. The terms to be used for analyzing them are therefore not without significance. The labels themselves – whether analytic or "folk" – deserve more serious consideration as part of the agenda of this Special Issue, namely the "discursive construction" of "Asian Pacific American identities." The questions to raise include: Who uses the notion of "Asian Pacific American"? How was it created? Is this in part a census or governmental category to which speakers orient? Do some reject it? What are the temporal and spatial erasures and elisions that are the concomitant to the creation of any such category. As in the earlier case of "Italian American" and other white ethnic labels, there are numerous interesting ironies. The country of "Italy" did not exist when many of those retrospectively labeled Italian American first arrived in the United States. Furthermore, no unified Italian identity was available even in Italy until long after the Italian state was unified. Thus the creation of an Italian American identity-category was a political process that took place in the United States. The category itself took a while to coalesce, relying not only on mass media but also on the work of advocacy organizations. It was a politics of representation, in keeping with the logic of the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, and arguably a white response to it. "Latino" or "Hispanic" have been even more contentious.   And, as Labrador rightly points out, the categories he discusses are regionally specific.

Thus, one would like to know at what scale of politics – neighborhood, city, regional, national – are any of these labels recruited for interactional or inscriptional use? What are the interactional effects of using one out of the several categories in circulation in a social group? For instance, in the case of Shankar's study – desi vs. South Asian American vs. Indian vs. Tamil. Some categories are strategically or perhaps inadvertently erased, as others come to political prominence. As Shankar notes

in passing, these labels are neither transparent nor strictly referential nor stable. Rather, they are likely to be performatives in the following second-order sense: the very use of them in particular contexts marks the user as a certain kind of person within the social group (e.g. pretentious or social climber, politically aware or conservative), just as the parodic use of phonological stereotypes (whether understood as "self" or "other") identifies the speaker in a second-order way as a certain kind of person.

This brings me to a second theme running through these three papers: They all analyze, in different ways, the use of linguistic stereotypes in mass media and therefore invite some thoughts on questions of perspective. As Chun and Labrador note, and Shankar's paper demonstrates, in mass mediated forms, it is hard to know who the audiences are, and the "up-take" by audiences can be quite varied and locally specific. Furthermore, taped, filmed or night club performances are doubtless designed for widespread circulation. The constructions of "publics" through the very creation of such tapes and their purchase and use is part of the politics of representation I have just discussed. Mass mediated artifacts can be the means for creating solidarity, either through imitation of forms (as in desi use of Bollywood films) or through protective alliance (as in the response to Abercrombie and Fitch T-shirts). But analysis of the tapes in themselves requires careful attention to perspectives made possible and indeed invited by the process of circulation.

Humor is a fertile site for examining questions of perspective. Theorists as diverse as Peirce, Simmel, Schutz and Mead long ago noted that social interaction would be impossible without typifications or token-level constructs. Thus, no single label of "racist" vs. "subversive" will do for the humor analyzed in these papers, as the authors are well aware. It is the way such judgments are formed that we should be analyzing, asking how they are arrived at through typifications and keyings as heard by analysts and by various portions and settings among the populations we are analyzing. Hence the relevance of understanding ethnic humor in the United States in terms of a history of in-group/out-group dynamics. Comics who play on ethnic stereotypes often succeed by offering "mainstreamers" or outsiders an insider's glimpse of an ethnic group. The "inside glimpse," no matter how stigmatizing, can mark the movement of the typified category to mainstream status, their presence now publicly speakable. This is often accompanied by the emergence of upwardly mobile populations who gain a measure of authenticity by a distanced association with the stigmatized ethnic category. Think: How charming that grandmother sounded like that; but we do not. Comics can succeed not only by subverting mainstream stereotypes (as Chun rightly suggests), but also by offering self-stereotypes to the in-group, allowing a stance for those who identify with the group but can also distance themselves by dint of mobility, education or simply age. Ethnicity in the United States is often a matter of commodification: the claim to "ownership" of voices, accents, and images that, because of social distance, provide authenticity but not stigma. One can only laud the authors of these papers for taking up, with such detail and subtlety, these complex and historically embedded processes of signification.