

- Deborah Thomas: [00:00](#) Hello, my name is Deborah Thomas, editor-in-chief of American Anthropologist, and this is Anthropological Airwaves.
- Arjun Shankar: [00:18](#) Welcome to our newest episode of Anthropological Airwaves. I'm Arjun Shankar and I'm really excited to introduce this episode which was produced by Diego Arispe-Bazan. In this episode. You'll hear from Adrienne Lo of the University of Waterloo and Jonathan Rosa of Stanford University, who both focus their discussions at the intersection of racialization processes and language ideologies as they relate to Asian and Latinx populations respectively. Both Lo and Rosa ask us to interrogate the politics of standardized English and the way that racial ideologies force nonwhite others to constantly navigate a never ending process of legitimating themselves through English language learning, which they ultimately can never quite achieve within the particular political economy of race we face today. It's a really important, fascinating discussion and I hope you all enjoy it.
- Kristina Nielsen: [01:20](#) Hello, this is Kristina Nielsen, I'm a Ph.D. student at the University of Pennsylvania, and I study accent and language in India's call-center industry. I'm joined today with Dr. Adrienne Lo of the University of Waterloo in Ontario. Today we are talking about an anthropological approach to the English language. Thank you for joining me, Dr. Lo. So maybe you could tell us a little bit about how different varieties of English might embody different images of person and why it's important to distinguish between different types of English in Korea and also what this sort of social role of English is.
- Adrienne Lo: [01:36](#) So as, as many people have written about, English and Korea really serves as a gatekeeper to a university education to advancement at the workplace, to getting a good job as a South Korean when you want to get a job with a multinational corporation like Samsung or LG, often part of that interview will be in English. Even if your job has absolutely nothing to do with international marketing or international communication, you will nevertheless be required to demonstrate your skills in English for job advancement. Even. So, once you get that job, you will keep taking English tests.
- Adrienne Lo: [02:14](#) And so English is very important. It's become this marker that demonstrates that you are committed to your job, that you care about studying, that you want to advance, that you were the kind of modern, global subject that Korea is seeking. So in that sense, uh, I think Koreans recognize that English is very valuable linguistic capital to get. But it's also hard to get, in terms of where you can get access to this variety that they think of as

you know, real English or world English, whatever they might call it. So there's a belief that in order to get this valuable form of capital, you can't stay in Korea, you have to leave. So it's not merely the elite or the wealthy who leave. It's now a middle-class and even sometimes working class phenomenon where Koreans feel that they must leave the country -- everything from a short term summer study course in the Philippines to maybe two years in New Zealand. And I think part of that is tied to the economic situation -- the fact that jobs are extremely difficult to get even for university graduates. So parents really feel that they have to give their children every possible leg up. And one of those legs up is, is certainly English. So in terms of the varieties of English, I suppose Koreans like, like many other people believe that there are different kinds of English. So there is really good English, right? The kind of English that might be spoken in London or New York or maybe in Toronto and that English, it is believed is not available in Korea or perhaps is available in the personas of quote unquote native speakers. So teachers who travel from these important global cities to Korea to teach, but for example, they believe that the forms of English spoken by American GIs and Korea are not valuable. So America has a huge military presence in South Korea and Koreans definitely believe that the kind of English that is spoken by GIs is not the kind of English you want to learn.

- Kristina Nielsen: [04:15](#) So what makes that English less valuable? Are there like, features of that English that they view as different than the features of the English language teachers? Is it the sort of racial or social positioning of the GIs, you know, from their backgrounds in the US? Is it just their association with the military? That's fascinating.
- Adrienne Lo: [04:38](#) So I guess they understand American GIs as drunk and low class and violent. So the social characteristics that are identified with a figure of the GI in Korea are then projected upon the place in Seoul, a neighborhood called Itaewon, which is where the extremely large American military base is located. And then as you point out also upon the variety of English that those GIs supposedly speak.
- Street Interviewer: [05:07](#) Today, we're in Itaewon, the most famous foreign district in Korea to see if we can ask some random foreigners on their opinions on Korea. [Asking someone] What was one of your first impressions when you came here to Korea?
- American 1: [05:17](#) What surprised me the most was how late everybody stays out. Like it's like a nonstop party all night long.

Street Interviewer: [05:24](#) Have you ever felt discriminated against or uncomfortable in public spaces because you're a foreigner?

American 2: [05:29](#) Yeah. Maybe, I've been like turned away from clubs and stuff that don't allow foreign people in there.

Street Interviewer: [05:35](#) Why did they turn you down?

American 2: [05:36](#) Some of the dance clubs or some of the nightclubs there like they they've probably, had my guest is, and what I've heard is like maybe some people have caused trouble. They're like military guys who may look similar to me. White guys have gone in there and gotten in fights or they've caused disruption. So I think they just want to avoid that and they're like, all right, just get them out of here. You know?

Adrienne Lo: [05:54](#) So the place in Seoul, Itaewon, it's seen as a sort of repository of failed modernity or, or failed globalization and it's where these sort of low class Koreans who try to hang around the base and these sort of figures like or the small shop owner. But these are, these are not the sort of, how shall I say, elite, high-class, transnationally cosmopolitan kind of figures. Oftentimes whiteness is really seen as the key to go to English. So there's, there's been work looking at how, how different kinds of speakers of English get paid different amounts in private English institutions. So the idea is that sometimes if you are white, so let's say from Norway, right, you will get paid more than if you are pro are racialized minority, but from a country in which English is the dominant language. So for example, you will get paid more if you're white in some cases than if if you are African American or Korean American and then Korean Americans are, are, are interesting in the way that they participate in this market.

Adrienne Lo: [07:03](#) So on the one hand, particularly in the realm of K-Pop, they're seen as having access to this kind of cool form of African American inflected English, which is, you know, like cool. But on the other hand, we know for a fact that they and also African American instructors get paid less or seen as less desirable as instructors in the private English market than you realize. So that there are these, again, stories, in the media about poor South Koreans who can't afford to go and study abroad and they think, oh, I'll just learn English here. So they decided that they're going to take jobs Itaewon, because Itaewon is a place where one can be lots of foreigners and they work as waitresses, supposedly the story in, you know, and they serve American men. But the story goes on the article, uh, in one of the leading conservative newspapers, but what they don't

realize is that the only people you meet in Itaewon or drunk and foreigners and that the only kind of English you will learn there is quite restricted English.

- Adrienne Lo: [08:02](#) So the idea is that, which is very interesting because on the one from some perspectives, that would be the best form of language learning it, right? It would be naturalistic. It wouldn't be you sitting in with a grammar book. It'd be you, it'd be you learning English from actually talking to real people who speak English. People who speak English as a quote native language. But in these cautionary tales in the media, it's understood that this very naive, kind of unsuspecting, poor, you know, South Korean girl thinks she's getting real English. But what she's really getting is this very discredited form of quote Itaewon English or restricted English which is associated with these, with sex workers, with racialized GIs, with drunken people. And that's not the kind of English you want to learn.
- Kristina Nielsen: [08:46](#) It also seems like within K-Pop, because the one who does the sort of African American rapping, hip-hop, has always bad boy that he's not, he's not the, he's not the leader of the group, usually he's always the sort of bad boy, kind of maybe had a rough background, kind of... I think I am revealing how much I like K-Pop to you right now...
- Adrienne Lo: [09:06](#) But it's also appealing particularly because he's that rough guy who's lived on the edge and a little bit dangerous.
- Kristina Nielsen: [09:16](#) Okay. So I think I want to change directions a little bit now and think about English in the United States in the context of this group of so called Asian-Americans. So maybe we could start out with talking about first, what is this term Asian American, and to what extent is it useful? To what extent is it itself implicated as a racialization process?
- Adrienne Lo: [09:39](#) So the English spoken by Asian-Americans is complicated, partly because of course, the cultural formation that we think of as Asian American includes all kinds of people with different linguistic backgrounds and different migration histories and this huge area of the world. And you know, Koreans go to the US and they suddenly realize, you know, Americans think we have something in common with Japanese, which to a Korean absolutely makes no sense whatsoever. So I guess part of the issue with the term Asian American is the imaginings of language that are projected upon this group and how those are in dialogue with the way that other groups are racialized in the United States.

Adrienne Lo:

[10:20](#)

So the idea that these kinds of groups have always been in dialogue with one another, right? The colonialization is partly about slavery, but it's also a lot about the transition to quote free labor linked to Asia because the people who were brought in as quote free labor were migrants from, from China and India, this kind of figure of the Coolie. So the idea that we, you know, we got rid of that bad thing that was slavery and we replaced it with this better thing, free labor, uh, but of course that free labor was not very free. Right? It was coerced. It was racialized. And I guess we need to think about that today. You know, in the contemporary United States, that Asian-Americans do play this, what's sometimes been called this triangular role, in relation to blackness and whiteness. So, this whole idea of the model minority is partly that, you know, Asians, they immigrate to the US and like, Hey, they do just fine. It's all great. You know, they're all going to harvard, you don't have to one generation and, and that is implicitly or not even so implicitly a rebuke against African Americans. So why, why? What's wrong with you, why can't you do that? And, the idea is that that's because the Asians, they have that good culture, that Confucian, you know, stuff and you must then have bad culture and I think we can see that same process in regard to language.

Adrienne Lo:

[11:42](#)

So if African Americans are understood to speak what some people call a vernacular form of English, you know, African American English, which is seen as maybe suitable for many contexts like job interviews or you know, news reports or things like that. And Asian Americans are often understood as not having an ethnolect. Right? Not having a distinctive variety of English that they speak as Americans, that is again, in a tool in the service of holding up Asian-Americans. So therefore it must be the choice of African Americans to speak this quote, self-defeating, you know, variety of English and if they choose to speak that way and that will limit their economic advancement. Well I guess that's their choice, but they could choose a different path, the path that Asian Americans have taken. So I think that what we recognize as linguistic difference and what we don't recognize as linguistic difference, it's important to think about who's doing the recognizing and, and that the focus is always on that movement, right? For Asian Americans, they just assimilate. It's just like so easy for them.

Kristina Nielsen:

[12:52](#)

Yeah. And just to reiterate and be clear, like there's a huge variation in how people from different racial backgrounds speak right? Like there's not only varieties among African American, there's regional ways of speaking. So in part we're talking about stereotypy.

- Adrienne Lo: [13:06](#) Yes. We're talking about what varieties get recognized as righties and who was doing the recognizing or the non-recognizing.
- Kristina Nielsen: [13:13](#) Right. But another part of the story might be this question of our Asian Americans, are they also implicated in a racialization process that's not just sort of them versus black people, but sort of in their own right?
- Adrienne Lo: [13:28](#) Yeah, I mean, I think it's very important to point out that there, there are different forms of racialization. So people have looked at how certain kinds of Asian-Americans get racialized as model minorities and then certain kinds get racialized as non-model minorities. Right? So they're positioned again within this black white access and, and this relates to class, you know, and again, they're all also understood as speaking a nonstandard form of English usually. So those things are linked.
- Kristina Nielsen: [13:56](#) I was thinking about your work on the community in California.
- Adrienne Lo: [14:01](#) Oh, okay.
- Kristina Nielsen: [14:02](#) Where you were looking at how people talk about language as a form of racializing people and how that kind of problematizes the model minority idea.
- Adrienne Lo: [14:14](#) A lot of people called the model minority myth, but the model, the idea of the model minority is that Asians, they moved to the US and then a generation later, they're all assimilated and it's great, and white people love them. And I guess a lot of on the ground research with actual real living Asian Americans has shown that this is not the case. This is the idea that the foreignness persists, that they are forever foreigners. And yeah, certainly, at least in the community that I studied in California, there was this issue of, of white-flight, that when the town was seen as quote becoming too Asian, realtors started steering people away and saying, "well, you might feel more comfortable if you move to this other, you know, adjacent community or you know there's a lot of competition in the schools here. You know, your child might, might do better at the neighboring school district."
- Adrienne Lo: [15:06](#) People like to talk about language as a proxy for race. So they wouldn't say necessarily, "I don't want to live around all these Asians," but, but they would talk about how "I just don't understand the signs anymore. They're all in Chinese everywhere and all these people, they're not speaking English. I

don't even know where I live anymore -- their secrecy, you know, what are they talking about when they use that language." And again, this goes back to these longstanding descriptions of speaking in an Asian language, speaking Chinese, but then just Asianness in general, with secrecy and deception. I think that those ideas still persist. It's not as though they've gone away now that we've achieved this new post racial moment or anything.

Diego Arispe-Bazán: [16:31](#)

I'm here with Jonathan Rosa. Thank you for joining us, for this podcast.

Jonathan Rosa: [16:35](#)

I'm happy to be here.

Diego Arispe-Bazán: [16:37](#)

So, I just wanted to dive right into things. There's this assumption that most folks have that there's such a thing as standard language and that everybody speaks a standard language where they should try to speak the standard language though, quote unquote correct language, the proper form. And so when I challenged my students than I basically show them why that doesn't work because of all the different ways in which people speak in different contexts in which people speak, their minds are blown and you work on this issue a lot in terms of the realm of education, but. So I wanted you to talk a little bit about folks who might not be familiar with this notion. When people talk about a standard language, what are they actually talking about?

Jonathan Rosa: [17:12](#)

Yeah, I think we can approach it in multiple ways. So, I tend to use the phrasing standardized English rather than standard English. So when you use it as a noun phrase, it sounds like an objective thing. And when you use it as a verb phrase, it's sort of suggests that there's a process that's happening that's positioning some forms of standard and others as nonstandard. I'm interested in that process more so than I am in the object, because the object shifts. So, you know, I was just joking with someone a little while ago about the category of academic language, which I really see as a gloss standard English or standard language.

Diego Arispe-Bazán: [17:51](#)

Right.

Jonathan Rosa: [17:51](#)

And uh, you know, I was describing an example of a high school where I worked where one of the teachers was talking about the principal of the school and the principal is a Puerto Rican woman, and a white teacher said about the Puerto Rican principal: "um, she speaks English like one of our ninth graders. And from what I understand, her Spanish isn't that good either."

So I said to this teacher, this is really interesting, so what aspects of her language stick out to you as incorrect or deficient? And she said, well, she wrote this letter of recommendation for someone and she used the phrase making applications. So she said, I'm writing to recommend so and so who was making application for such and such position. And she said, who would ever use the phrase making application,, that's so dumb and wrong. So I, you know, I didn't really know what to make of that, so I just googled the phrase and found it in the Guardian, found it in the New York Times, so it's an arcane usage but that based on the principal's positionality was perceived as, and we can talk about race, gender, a whole range of dynamics, what was perceived as incorrect or deficient.

Jonathan Rosa: [18:53](#)

Now this is a woman, the principal, who holds a doctorate in education, who holds a institutionally superior position and is still called into question based on her linguistic legitimacy. So for me the stakes of this are much higher when we're talking about young people particularly in marginalized or very vulnerable situations. So if not even someone who has obtained a doctorate is perceived as speaking or producing standardized English, then what is that category mean exactly, what are we doing with it?

Diego Arispe-Bazán: [19:24](#)

And that process is one that is not only racialized but also has all kinds of implications for forms of identification, self identification, community building. So I've encountered educators that will say, "well we need to teach them the proper language because otherwise they won't be successful." Right? And so it's hard to sometimes to get people to understand that that doesn't mean that you have to devalue and dismiss the linguistic forms that they have incorporated from the social space that they come from.

Jonathan Rosa: [19:53](#)

Yeah. I ask people, you know, what's, what's the nature of the problem you're trying to solve? So if we're talking about say, educational underachievement, you know, high rates of educational underachievement for particular populations, we can talk about race, class, et cetera. You know, if we know that that's a structural phenomenon, then the intervention can't be to teach people to use particular linguistic patterns. The structure of the economy is not a linguistic problem. So simply by learning particular scripts, you don't necessarily, you know, that doesn't mean that there will be affordable housing or living wage or a wage at all or access to institutional resources. So I worry that we're selling people a false story. You know, and I, everyone who I work closely with those that I've been dwelling with this Toni Morrison quote for so long now where she says,

the function, the very serious function of racism is distraction. And there will always be one more thing.

- Jonathan Rosa: [20:51](#) So you prove you're good enough in one way and then the bar will shift. So when some of my talks, I show how from some perspectives, the problem is that certain populations lack language altogether. So you didn't read books to your kid, you didn't speak to them enough when they were young. And then for other populations we say, Oh, you don't have the English language. So it's not that you lacked language, you lack the right language. So you're an English language learner, you're designated as an English language learner. You need to learn English. And then for other populations who then learn English, we say, Oh, you don't know the right variety of English, you need to learn standard English or academic English, this kind of thing. And it, it makes it feel as though there will always be one more thing. So then you master this one and you're still perceived as deficient. And then the principal of the high school I was just mentioning obtains a doctorate, is the principal of the school and it's still deficient. So what kind of game are we trying to play or when in the situation and is it worthwhile to be playing on those terms or could we be doing something else altogether.
- News Clip: [21:49](#) Kids who don't have books in their homes before going to school, who haven't experienced being read to in their homes who haven't been introduced to literacy early, have already fallen into a critical gap language. Experts even have a name for it: the 30 million word gap.
- Testimonial: [22:07](#) There's not just one challenge to face. And we talk about achievement gaps. Even if we just talk about racial achievement gaps. We have students of color in high income suburban districts that are lagging their white classmates. You have inner city school districts that are high poverty, have a difficult time attracting teachers. So the work that needs to happen is to figure out how in each of these contexts we can make the changes that are necessary to produce the excellence to which we aspire.
- Barack Obama: [22:40](#) If we're truly gonna restore our country's promise of opportunity for all, then we need to guarantee every American child a great education from the earliest age. This week I'm challenging even more Americans to join this effort. Let's find new ways to deliver a world class education to our children, bridge the word gap, and put more young people on a path to success.

Diego Arispe-Bazán: [23:01](#) There's two separate issues, so I'll start with the first. So indeed there's this, there's this kind of teleology of success that's supposed to be achieved by jumping all of these different hurdles including incorporating into your linguistic repertoire. What do we do in that case? So I guess that's why I brought in my experience with chatting with other teachers and explaining this fact to them, but I think you're going a step further, right? So then what is the next step in terms of how we address these issues in the realm of education, which is something that you, that you work on and are an expert in, right?

Jonathan Rosa: [23:35](#) It's not an educational problem when we're talking about a historical problem, a problem at the level of an entire society. And so at that point when we're just reducing it to something that could happen within classrooms were settling teachers a false story. We're selling administrators are false story was selling students and families of false story, which is that if you would subscribe to these practices, and then you know, you would enter into this trajectory, or the ends with success or achievement or something like that. But again, what, what kind of vision of change is that? So when I think about what else we could be doing, well, how are schools oriented to the communities that they're serving? Who plays what role in structuring that? When we look at our schools, it's a profoundly colonial enterprise. The project of US schooling, as it has been from its inception. So the idea that under achievement is some accident or an achievement gap, gap talking if you want to see me turned completely red, just talk about gaps. But, you know, the idea that if we would just perfect schools --

Diego Arispe-Bazán: [24:41](#) That children get quote unquote left behind.

Jonathan Rosa: [24:45](#) Yeah. As a sort of an accident, as opposed to saying, no, you can't have a society built as this society was built without having institutions that reproduce really particular sorts of social relations. You know, the entire project is structured in such a way that it subordinates particular populations and positions them as deficient. The whole point of the institution is to orient toward deficiency, not to do anything collectively. It's not part of any collective vision. That's the critique. The alternative is, well, how could schools be structured otherwise? I have worked in schools where you have almost all students of color in the school and almost all white administrators and teachers, and there's no excuse for it. When we think about the political histories, out of which bilingual education emerged, right? That was part of the post civil rights moment where people are articulating radical political projects and bilingual education was

about community control of schools and so it wasn't just a project of teaching language.

- Jonathan Rosa: [25:47](#) It was who is the teacher, where are they from? What's the variety? Who gets to determine all of those questions? What's the curriculum look like? What's the goal? What's the relationship with families? That was what bilingual education was historically in the mid 20th century as it was sort of being created and emerging. At this point, bilingual education looks like standardized Spanish and standardized English and the idea is that the US and in terms of we're talking about a Latinx populations, what it ends up doing is positioning is doubly marginalizing particular racialized students and positioning them as lacking the legitimate variety of their so called home language and the literature, legitimate variety of the so called school language. The alternative project would have to ask. You're going to have to sort of rethink the modes of power and authority and who gets to shape what the institution looks like.
- Diego Arispe-Bazán: [26:41](#) So this allows us now to talk a little more explicitly about racializing processes that happened through language and we've talked about it a little bit already, but I was interested in the concept of racial linguistics, which you mobilize with Nelson Flores and your recent article together. But that's been around a little bit. There's like the edited volume, but maybe you can talk about it a little bit.
- Jonathan Rosa: [27:02](#) So I've been thinking through this language and race relationship for some time now. And so even from the beginning of Grad School, my master's thesis in 2006 was the name of my, what my book will be coming out next year, which is "Looking like a Language, Sounding like a Race". So I've been trying to figure out how race and language are over-determined and part of this comes from my observations on the ground. Part of it comes from lived experience of sort of people expecting you to know a particular language or thinking that certain languages primordial live within you.
- Jonathan Rosa: [27:35](#) And I think for Latinx populations in the United States, there's the sense that the Spanish language is what defines you as who you are. And yet I found on the ground in so many situations that varieties of Spanish were the clearest ways to distinguish between different, you know, to create intra-Latinx difference, sort of the idea that this category, this ethnic-racial category corresponds to this language form corresponds to this nation state. So, my intellectual project for some time now has been trying to figure out how these categories are naturalized, the ways that certain populations just, we're continually positioned

as deficient. No matter what they did linguistically, no matter how so-called good their English was, they were still seen as long-term English language learners. So many students never test out of designation as English language learners. What's so interesting is that the reclassification tests, often students who are designated students who identify as monolingual English users can't pass that test because the test is focused on content just as much as language.

Speaker 5: [28:39](#)

So you know, for some people, they need to learn standard English or some people they need to learn just to English. For some people they need to learn this, that the other end. And it looks like these are separate problems that people have -- that heritage learners, that standard English learners, that, that all these categories, these categories that are associated with distinctive ethno-racial groups, modes of migration --they're being marginalized and really similar ways. And so I was really trying to rethink the Herderian -- in linguistic anthropology, what we call the Herderian ideology of one language, one nation, one people, this ethno-racial category corresponds to this language form, corresponds to this nation state, and I think the one people -- part of that hasn't been fully, or, I think the racialized nature of the one people, part of that hasn't been fully interrogated. So my intellectual project for some time now has been trying to figure out how these categories are co-naturalized.

Diego Arispe-Bazán: [29:33](#)

And sometimes it matters, sometimes it matters for a community to have these boundaries and that's, that's also perfectly fine, but it's important to understand how these boundaries operate, what they do when it's important to challenge them, because they're furthering any number of, both historical but also contemporary forms of exclusion, of dispossession, etc.

Jonathan Rosa: [29:54](#)

That point is so crucial. And, I agree, I'm really glad that you made it. So my goal is not to say to people don't claim a language or something like that because in various settings that might make a lot of sense depending on the particular political situation and the strategies that correspond to that situation or are meaningful to people based on that context. So, it's not a straightforward easy situation where we can say, oh, just get rid of all of the categories. Now let's figure out how they came into being and how they function. And that's make sense of all of that.

Diego Arispe-Bazán: [30:27](#)

And categories are how it makes sense of the world. Language exists because of contrast.

- Jonathan Rosa: [30:31](#) Absolutely.
- Diego Arispe-Bazán: [30:32](#) And so again, I tell my own students, you know, having categories isn't a problem, but how we construe difference and how we talk about difference, that's when you get into problems when people start essentializing difference.
- Jonathan Rosa: [30:46](#) And it's similar to the conversations that I've had in the past around the "I" word and illegality of an ocean of illegal immigrants. It's not that I want a new label for the sake of having a new label. It's that the debate around why we have these labels in the first place. And when I was doing interviews, Interviews with a lot of journalists, they would say, if we don't call people illegal, what should we call them? And I would say: wrong question! The question is why is it that commodities have more migration rights than human beings? Why isn't migration of fundamental human right? Why do we need a label for this in the first place? And they said, well, that's prevailing immigration law. I said, okay, well then maybe we need to interrogate prevailing immigration law to figure out the history out of which those laws emerged.
- Arjun Shankar: [31:35](#) Thank you all so much for listening and if you're interested in collaborating with Anthropological Airwaves or sharing your work, please do not hesitate to reach out. You can find our information on the American Anthropologist website, and in just a few short weeks, we'll have our next episode and we look forward to you tuning back in then. Have a great rest of your week!