

Gloria Joung

Professor Anne Bello

ENGLWRIT 111

27 October 2023

Colliding Words

Have you had an experience that made you realize you were different? Did your uniqueness give insight into the divisions within your own community?

I felt that strange realization one afternoon when I was playing ponies with my cousin who had recently come to visit from Korea.

Cousin: “We should put our horses in the house, not the stable, for the winter.”

Me: That is a good idea ma'am (formal) + “요” (yo)

(at this, my cousin quickly frowns at me and turns into a bright shade of cherry tomato red)

Cousin: “No, no! I am younger than you. You don't have to be formal with me. Drop the “요” (yo)!”

Me: Yes ma'am (formal) “네” (ne)

Cousin: “ I said there's no need! Don't say “네” (ne), just say 응 (eung), okay?” she says sternly while firmly shaking her pointer finger.

But I could not follow this simple command. We struggled as we wrestled back and forth with my formality throughout our conversations. It seemed the “요” (yo)s and the “네” (ne)s were tied to my tongue. Not just that, but I became aware of a gap between my cousin and I. That disparity started to become more apparent as I became involved in discourse communities other

than my primary community.

To first understand these differences, I will quickly explain my primary discourse community. Both of my parents are from the Korean countryside. My mother came from Busan and my father from Changdae. As they have been taught since childhood, I, too, learned to maintain a submissive attitude, prioritize the collective group, and most importantly, honor my elders with a tone of formality. My parents or close Korean elders were so pleased with my proper attitude that they lavished me with various compliments such as “beautiful daughter” (in Korea, the term “beautiful” implied “good-mannered”), “well-seasoned daughter,” and the like. I can still remember how they would take my small hands into theirs to massage my hands and say “how beautiful (well-mannered) she is!” I had learned to adopt the Discourse of my Korean community. As James Paul Gee put it, I established a “sort of a ‘identity kit’ which comes complete with the appropriate costume and instructions on how to act, talk, and often write, so as to take on a particular role that others will recognize” (7). I became accustomed to and abided by the appropriate mannerisms that were favored within Korean culture.

However, the Korean community was not the only Discourse I was associated with. Yet, within my other group, contrarily, I did not follow their way of speech or their attitudes after overhearing conversations between some classmates which went like this:

Classmate: “Yo, did you see Mr. G today?”

His friend: “No, why?”

Classmate: “He’s got a nice buzz. I smacked his hair today and told him ‘I like your cut G!’”

His friend: “No shot!”

(both walk away, laughing hysterically)

I felt taken aback by this unfamiliar nature. The youth appeared to have a lack of self-restraint, rowdy, and quite loud about their opinions, especially when talking behind adults. In Korean culture, being offensive towards adults was heavily frowned upon. The mannerisms were quite contrary to my primary Discourse community's values, thus, I actively resisted speaking in this style. In doing so, I continued to remain within the safe boundaries of my Korean circle. However, that all changed when I had to move from Arizona to Massachusetts. Leaving behind my local Korean elders and with my parents often away from home, I had to figure out how to become accustomed to my new surroundings.

As I stepped into a foreign discourse, it was quite instinctive for me to use the mannerisms from my prior experiences. My primary discourse was “the one we first use to make sense of the world and interact with others” (Gee 7). That is what I did. One time I was eating lunch with a group of friends and a friend said:

Friend: “I just *love* studying history and memorizing all those facts”

Me: “Hm! Me too. It lets you see the whole picture”

(stares and very long awkward moment of silence)

In this conversation, I did not know what sarcasm was. Mostly in Korean culture, everything is quite sincere (thus I struggled with understanding sarcasm during my transition). Within that long uncomfortable silence, it was clear that those who were within that discourse may have felt the way I did. We both were unfamiliar and awkward with the other's mannerisms. Nonetheless, as I continued to engage with my peers and the culture of Hamilton, I

was able to embrace and practice the informal language of the East. My once monotone and quiet “good morning and hellos” became replaced with enthusiastic “Hi! And whatcha up to?” I was finally catching onto their jokes and finding enjoyment in watching my friends laugh hysterically at some of my own play of words. As Gee implies “Discourses are not mastered by overt instruction... but by enculturation (‘apprenticeship’) into social practices through scaffolded and supported interaction with people who have already mastered the Discourse” (7).

Now, I am deeply adjusted and comfortable with the Western ways. Too comfortable. I realized this when I told my mom about a conversation I had with a Korean lady. In hopes of encouraging the hardworking and tired lady, I told her “your hard work will surely pay off.” At this, my mom frowned at me. An all too familiar frown like my Korean cousin. My mom disapproved of the fact that I had forgotten Korea’s essential principle: the respect of hierarchy. As Gee says, “There is often conflict and tension between the values, beliefs, attitudes, interactional styles, uses of language, and way of being in the world which two or more Discourses represent” (7). At this I felt my cheeks grow unbearably warm. I had praised her like an elder would. I had dared as a younger person to tell her of my opinion. I had acted towards her like an equal, according to the Western mannerism. What once seemed so ingrained in me seemed like a foreign mannerism that I had to consciously remind myself of time and time again.

As I continue to engage between these two discourses, I saw how I must carefully distinguish and play the “identity kit” for each. My colliding experiences between these two distinct cultures and Gee’s explanation about diverse Discourses made that apparent. With a more holistic view and the ability to recognize the distinctions within my unique communities, I can be the polite and well-mannered daughter and be the bubbly, dad-joke loving friend.

Works Cited

Gee, James Paul. "Literacy, Discourse, and Linguistics: Introduction." *The Journal of Education*, Vol. 171, No. 1, 1989, pp. 7-8.