

Broken English According to Nonnative Speakers

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Abstract

The stigmatizing descriptor broken English is widely recognized and socially acceptable in the English-speaking world. It serves to emphasize the “otherness” of nonnative speakers and does not measure communicative ability (Lindemann/Moran 2017: 663). Existing linguistic research on the term tends to focus on its use by native speakers in reference to nonnative English. This paper contributes to research on broken English from a nonnative speaker perspective through a Critical Discourse Analysis of its use in language-biographical interviews with seven Korean immigrants in the United States. The aim is to ascertain its meaning and function as used by nonnative speakers mainly to describe their own English. Each participant has been living in the US and communicating in English for at least 25 years, yet almost all claim to speak broken English. The linguistic judgements and self-perceptions of these Korean immigrants are noticeably shaped by the pervasive standard ideology present in the US. They are also strongly influenced by how Asians in the US are seen (and thus treated) as perpetual foreigners and not authentic Americans, whether they are foreign-born or not (Lippi-Green 2012: 285). This analysis shows that the use of broken English in this data largely aligns with its use by native speakers. Broken English conclusively emerges as an ideologically encoded term, no matter the labeler. Nonnative speakers internalize standard language ideology in their applications of this descriptor to their own language, thus maintaining the imbalanced power structures which marginalize them.

Keywords: *nonnative English, Korean American, immigrant, language ideology and linguistic judgments*

1 Introduction

Yeah, I'm speaking English, still **broken English**, but I just still – you know, I can speak people um uh uh American people. They understand, so I'm done with that. I'm done. No more English learning! haha

- Crystal¹

When I was conducting language-biographical interviews with seven Korean immigrants living in the US, the topic of English proficiency generated mixed reactions. It is no surprise that most

¹ All study participants have been assigned pseudonyms.

of these Korean immigrants expressed linguistic insecurity and harsh judgments of their English skills; foreign language anxiety is often observed among Koreans speaking English, particularly in the classroom (see e. g. Chin 2002 and Lee, Schutz and van Vlack 2017). The same has been documented in attitude studies with nonnative speakers in general (see e. g. Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope 1986, Gregersen and Horwitz 2002, Yan and Horwitz 2008, Sadighi and Dastpak 2017 and Nilsson 2019). What is striking is that six of the seven participants referred to their language exactly as Crystal does above: *broken English*. Of all the terms to describe their English and that of other nonnative speakers, *broken English* was used most consistently. The definition and characteristics of *broken English* reported by the participants comprise a range of features that vary according to context, speaker and labeler. This paper sets out to analyze this term in more depth and place these utterances within the context of current research on nonnative speaker attitudes, focusing primarily on attitudes towards their own English.

Existing linguistic research on *broken English* has thus far concentrated on its use by native speakers in reference to a third party's language. Utterances of self-described *broken English* are rare in analyzed corpus data (Lindemann and Moran 2017: 658). More research on this reflexive use by nonnative speakers could therefore provide important insight into how they view themselves and navigate the power imbalance present in an English dominant society. This paper will thus examine *broken English* from a nonnative speaker perspective by conducting a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of its occurrence in interview data. The aim is to define this term and its functions when employed by nonnative English speakers. The results will be compared to previous research utilizing native speaker data to assess how the term is used by each group.

Section 2 of this paper will detail the relationship between *broken English* and standard language ideology in the US. It will also summarize two relevant linguistic studies analyzing how purported *broken English* speakers are perceived and constructed by native speakers. Section 3 will identify this study's research questions and hypotheses. Data and methodology will be explained in Section 4, after which the results will be presented in Section 5. Sections 6 and 7 will formulate a definition of *broken English* and its functions as they emerge from the data, respectively. Both sections will examine whether the nonnative speaker use of *broken English* is different in any regard to the uses employed by native speakers. The concluding section will discuss wider implications, looking at language and power as they pertain to these findings and suggest new avenues of research to facilitate a better understanding of nonnative speaker attitudes towards English.

2 What is broken English?

Within the US, *broken English* is a commonly used and recognized term. Its most basic

definition “denote[s] language that deviates from an undefined norm, reflecting a focus on accuracy rather than communicative ability” (Lindemann and Moran 2017: 655). The ‘undefined norm’ is an idealized abstraction against which the English of real speakers is compared and, in some cases, subsequently labeled ‘broken’ if it does not measure up. This norm is taken for granted as obvious and uncontested. *Broken English* therefore only makes sense in a standard language culture where the socio-cognitive notion of an ‘unbroken’ ideal is shared in the minds of speakers. As Milroy (2001: 543, original emphasis) astutely states:

the standard ideology decrees that the standard is an idea in the mind – it is a *clearly delimited, perfectly uniform and perfectly stable variety* – a variety that is never perfectly and consistently realized in spoken use.

Lippi-Green (2012: 68, added emphasis) identifies the social groups believed to speak the idealized standard and one of the many powerful actors responsible for spreading this ideology: “Dominant institutions promote the notion of an overarching, homogenous standard language which is primarily *Anglo, upper middle-class* and *ethnically middle-American*.”

Not all cultures adhere to standard language ideology. In some multilingual communities where code-switching carries overt prestige, such as New Guinea (see Sankoff 1980), or where members feel no ties to a linguistic community, as in Melanesia (see Grace 1992), describing a speaker’s language as ‘broken’ could only correspond to unintelligibility, if anything at all, because assessing linguistic accuracy in one language is not socially meaningful.

This is not the case in the US, which serves as a prime example of a standard language culture. In interviews with White, middle class, native English-speaking college students, Shuck (2006: 263) found nonnative English speakers marked as non-White, foreign Others. A monolingualist ideology was evident in these interviews where being US-born, natively speaking English and being White were unmarked, normative categories so closely linked that one was able to, and often did, stand in for the others in discourse (cf. Shuck 2006: 273). Though the US does have a monolingual majority with the latest census data showing that 78.5% of all Americans speak only English at home, contact with other languages and nonnative English speakers is common (US Census Bureau 2020). These interactions are always shaped by assumptions tied to monolingualism and standard language ideology, which then manifest in a social hierarchy that positions native English speakers on top as the dominant group, and nonnative speakers as a marginalized group at the bottom.

Though socially acceptable to use in an everyday conversation, the term *broken English* is definitively stigmatizing given its focus on substandard linguistic accuracy. Research also shows the term serves to emphasize the nonnativeness of its speakers, and this is often connotated negatively (cf. Lindemann/Moran 2017: 663). This negativity is to be expected as numerous studies document generally negative native speaker attitudes towards nonnative English (see e. g. Ryan and Bulik 1982, Cargile and Giles 1998, Lindemann 2003 and Cargile

et al. 2010). Marking nonnativeness thus solidifies the aforementioned hierarchy of native speakers as the dominant in-group versus nonnative speakers as a marginalized out-group. Altogether, the everyday use and negative connotation of *broken English* make its occurrence an acceptable way of treating nonnative speakers poorly. That being said, nonnative speakers are conceivably familiar and have likely been confronted with *broken English* and similar linguistic judgments.

Limited research has been done on this specific term, but two recent studies shed light on the occurrence of *broken English*, analyzing elicited perception data from native speakers and naturalistic corpus data. First, Lindemann (2005) examined how US undergraduates perceive nonnative English through map-labeling and country rating tasks. Undergraduates were initially asked to label a world map with descriptions of the English spoken by hypothetical international students. They were then given a list of 58 countries and asked to rate the English of hypothetical students from each according to how correct, friendly, and pleasant it is. The descriptions they were asked to provide entail evaluations. One of the most frequent, and at times sole, descriptors for nonnative English-speaking countries was *broken English*; “having an accent” and comments on incomprehensibility were also common (cf. Lindemann 2005: 199). These results combined with the country rating task show that most comments were made about a large category of stigmatized nonnative Englishes, of which East Asian English was the most salient and most negatively evaluated (cf. Lindemann 2005: 208). Clearly, the use of *broken English* by native speakers in connection with stigmatized nonnative Englishes is not an uncommon pairing. Upon further inspection of respondents’ comments, Lindemann (2005) notes the broad range of possible interpretations of *broken English* from omitting linking verbs to speaking too fast. She concludes that, for example, “a customer’s comment about an employee’s ‘broken English’ shouldn’t necessarily be taken as evidence that the customer found the employee’s English to be insufficient for the job” (cf. Lindemann 2005: 190).

The second notable study, Lindemann and Moran (2017), attempts to make sense of these variable interpretations with data from two American English corpora: WebCorp and the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA). The data in both corpora stems from a wide variety of language users. It can reasonably be assumed that many of the contributors are native speakers based on the context of the analyzed utterances; however, this is difficult to confirm, especially with web texts (blogs, discussion forums, etc.). In any case, the authors find that *broken English* is defined by the standard features, both linguistic and extralinguistic, that it lacks, and its sense is fundamentally negative, as mentioned above; this deficit-oriented denotation rests on the existence of an oppositional ‘perfect English’, and as such, further propagates standard language ideology (cf. Lindemann and Moran 2017: 658).

The occurrence of *broken English* presents a discernible power asymmetry between the labeler

and the speaker whose English is evaluated. The labeler “claims the right to assess the other’s language and find it deficient,” while the speaker’s English is deemed acceptable to judge (cf. Lindemann and Moran 2017: 656). In their interrogation of how the term’s use constructs speakers as nonnative, Lindemann and Moran (2017) analyze many instances in which *broken English* speakers are characterized not only as nonnative, but also low status. Their findings overall thus reveal how the term *broken English* naturalizes standard language ideology and reinforces the subordination of marginalized groups. They identify the four following key mechanisms by which this occurs with *broken English*, noting that these are also at work in everyday talk about language in general:

1. scrutiny of the language of less powerful groups
2. accessible, decontextualizable language to refer to the phenomena identified through this increased scrutiny
3. lack of precision of that language
4. failure to observe and/or challenge this lack of precision

(Lindemann and Moran 2017: 664-666)

The first mechanism goes hand-in-hand with how *broken English* highlights its speakers’ nonnative status. The term’s commonplace use by a variety of speakers in differing genres in WebCorp and COCA speaks to its accessibility, considered in the second mechanism. The range of linguistic features that comprise *broken English* affirm its imprecision. None of the occurrences in Lindemann and Moran’s (2017) data dispute or even acknowledge whether *broken English* was an appropriate term for the language described, demonstrating the fourth mechanism outlined above. The same is not necessarily true for the current study’s interview data, and the extent to which any of these mechanisms occur in the interview data will be discussed in Section 8.

3 Research Questions and Hypotheses

The research questions in this study aim to characterize *broken English* as used by nonnative speakers and provide a basis of comparison to its use by native speakers. They are as follows:

1. What is the meaning and function of *broken English* when used by nonnative speakers?
2. Is the meaning and/or function of *broken English* when used by nonnative speakers different than when used by a native speaker?

Having lived in the US for decades, the participants have been subject to the same standard language culture as native speakers. Preston (2013: 176) reports findings from his quantitative studies investigating language attitudes in the US which show that the South, Alabama particularly, is regularly rated the least correct regional dialect by all respondents, including those from southern States themselves. This is an exception to the pattern among respondents

from all other US regions: each group, apart from Southerners, considers their own regional dialect to be the most correct. However, Southerners rated their region highest for pleasantness and thus, seem to be more invested in dimensions of group solidarity as opposed to social status; and “understandably so since they are constantly reminded in popular culture and even personal encounters that their language is lacking in this [social status] dimension” (Preston 2013: 176). The participants in the current study experience similar circumstances in that all have consumed American media with its numerous unfavorable and stereotypical representations of East Asians, especially regarding their mastery of English. They have also likely been subject to the consequences of these (usually negative) stereotypes and racism in the form of disrespectful commentary in personal interactions, job discrimination and the like.

The expectation is then that the meaning and function of *broken English* will reflect the findings in previous research. The term’s meaning is expected to comprise a range of negatively connotated descriptions that vary in specificity as well as according to labeler, speaker and context. Its function will also likely be twofold: to (negatively) evaluate nonnative speaker language skills and to highlight the “otherness” of nonnative English speakers. *Broken English* will not refer to incomprehensible English but will rather mark its speaker as a foreigner. The use of *broken English* by these participants is predicted to ultimately assist in upholding standard language ideology and reifying a native speaker ideal.

Regarding the second research question, similarity among native and nonnative speaker usage of *broken English* is anticipated for reasons already stated above. A comparison is warranted to see if the participants in this study who self-identify as *broken English* speakers, as in the introductory quote, perceive or talk about themselves more positively, or at all differently, than native speakers do when utilizing the descriptor.

4 Data and Methodology

The data in this study comprise approximately seven hours of language-biographical interviews with seven Korean immigrants in the US. The interviews were conducted in 2018 and 2019 in-person and over the phone. All participants were born in South Korea (henceforth Korea) and immigrated to the US in adolescence or early adulthood. All speak Korean as their first language and English as their second or third language. Table 1 below lists the participants by their pseudonyms and provides an overview of basic demographic information. Twelve occurrences of *broken English* and two of *broke English* were analyzed qualitatively. To determine the meaning of this term in the data, I examined who the speaker of *broken English* is, the linguistic features attributed to their English (if any) and the context of each utterance. The function of each occurrence was then determined by examining the subject matter of the utterance and where relevant, potential goals of the labeler.

Participant	Gender	Age		Highest Level of Education Completed	Occupation
		of arrival	in 2019		
Mary	woman	24	60	middle school	Retired
Andrew	man	12	40	high school	Small Business Owner
Matt	man	14	42	Master's degree	Sales Associate
Ji	woman	20	67	high school	Restaurant Owner
Grace	woman	27	56	Bachelor's degree	Sales Manager
Crystal	woman	32	67	middle school	Retired
Jennifer	woman	22	50	Bachelor's degree	Restaurant Manager

Table 12: Demographic information of the Korean immigrants in the US interviewed for this study

Following Nekvapil (2003: 64), language biographies are viewed as accounts “in which the narrator makes a language, or languages—and their acquisition and use in particular—the topic of his or her narrative”. Language-biographical interviews are similar to sociolinguistic interviews in that they are flexible or unstructured to allow for and encourage uninterrupted narratives from the interviewees. Using this approach, I asked participants for details regarding their English acquisition, in addition to how much English compared to Korean they use daily. All participants began learning English in elementary school and described the English instruction throughout their schooling in Korea as not helpful for their subsequent move to the US. English lessons focused on grammar rules and reading with little time spent on conversational skills or writing production. For this reason, all participants describe varying amounts of immersion, self-study and private English language instruction as responsible for their language skills today.

Language-biographical interviews are rich sources of sociolinguistic data, particularly concerning speaker attitudes and perceptions. I concluded each interview by asking participants for perceptions of the English skills of those in their home country. The linguistic landscape in Korea, especially English language education, has changed immensely in the past few decades. *Yeongeol yeolpung* or ‘English fever’, referring to the obsessive fervor with which Koreans pursued English language skills, is a countrywide phenomenon that began in the mid-1990s; the Korean government started recruiting native speaker teachers from English-speaking

countries then and revised the national English curriculum to newly emphasize communicative skills (cf. Park 2016: 458). So, the goal was to elicit perceptions about Korean use of English and general competency over time. I was also interested in how participants perceive their own English. This is where the majority of *broken English* instances occur. As mentioned previously, six out of seven total participants uttered the term. I did not use *broken English* myself and only asked follow-up questions about it after each initial utterance for clarification. My role as an interviewer is not neutral and the implication of my identity as a native English-speaking American likely produced some amount of observer's paradox. When I asked the participants about English speakers in Korea and their own English, I did so as a member of the dominant group believed to speak an idealized standard English. My desire as a linguist to avoid comparisons to any ideal and focus on objective descriptions is visible in the excerpts presented in Section 5. I was also vocal about encouraging the participants to acknowledge their linguistic achievements, likewise evident in my responses. The potential issues that arise from a native speaker interviewing nonnative speakers about this topic are understood, but two important mitigating factors are that I know all the participants very well and I, too, am Korean American. All were comfortable discussing the topics, open about their experiences and did not hesitate to share their opinions.

5 Results

All twelve instances of *broken English* and two of *broke English* found in these six interviews are analyzed in detail below. Just two participants, Mary and Grace, use *broken English* to describe the English that other Koreans speak. All other participants use the term exclusively for their own English. Mary mentions the term more than once in her interview and does eventually call the English that she speaks 'broken', but Grace does not use the term for herself at all. Thus, this section proceeds to look at *broken English* in two categories: describing another nonnative speaker's English and describing one's own English, respectively.

5.1 Describing another nonnative speaker's English

Grace describes the English she heard in the early 1980s while working in Seoul in (1) below. The speakers of *broken English* here are working-class shopkeepers who learned little to no English in school and likely picked up language skills on the job. These shopkeepers worked in Itaewon, a neighborhood popular with foreigners and close to a US military base. The livelihood of these shopkeepers then depended on their ability to converse in English. Grace provides examples of this *broken English* by listing fixed phrases these shopkeepers used in conversation repetitively, implying this is all the English they knew. She alludes to their use of the absolute minimum English necessary when, for example, answering questions with "just the dollar amount".

(1) **Grace:** [...] I mean we have shop in the Itaewon on the street. So, I had to visit it to give them uh merchandise, things like that. So, yeah. I see uh people speaking <unclear> **broken English**, you know? They- they sell to the some merchandise to the uh Americans.

MK: Mhm. Yeah, okay. Did you say- did you say broken English?

Grace: Yeah, they- **broken English**. They said- I mean- I mean not many people learn English speak<er?>. So even if they working at the shop, they said you- you know um how much you know um just- just like uh the dollar amount. How much is this? What is this? And is this coming in, you know that- that kind of things, ha.

Mary's interview illustrates a changing demographic of *broken English* speakers in Korea over the years. She describes encountering Koreans speaking English in Seoul in the early 1980s and in (2), specifically categorizes them as either 'low level' or 'high level' English speakers. According to her observations, low level English speakers, including her adult classmates at the private English academy, or *hagwon*, she attended, behaved improperly. High level English speakers had more education and thus, were more mature. They also speak professionally while low level speakers used *broken English*. This is a transparent example of language as a proxy for the language speakers, a typical phenomenon. As Lindemann (2005: 188) states, "evaluations of language varieties can be understood as evaluations of the groups who speak them". Mary does not provide any detail on the linguistic features of the English spoken by each group.

(2) **Mary:** Uh, you know, it's little bit low level people's acting weird and how- not mature.

MK: Okay.

Mary: But little bit more educate- low educated people little bit more educated people, they act much mature and then more polite.

MK: Okay, but what does that have to do with how well they speak English?

Mary: They speaking **broken English**.

MK: Who does?

Mary: Low level English people. But high level people, they speak much uhprofessionally.

She later compares Koreans' English proficiency when she was growing up in the countryside in the 1960s to what she encountered living in Seoul in the 1980s. While educated Koreans in the 1980s spoke English professionally, this was apparently not the case when she was growing up, as explained in (3). The highly educated elite bilinguals Mary observed as a child were not capable of holding a conversation in English. She suspects they did not practice enough and were therefore too nervous to participate in an English conversation. These Koreans had considerable English competency, as they were able to read and write well; but their conversation skills were underutilized for fear of speaking *broken English*, thereby losing face. So, these individuals did not actually speak *broken English*; they were just afraid they would if they tried to speak at all. This is a well-recorded fear many Korean learners of English have,

though they are more concerned about being seen as incompetent by other Koreans than by native English speakers (cf. Park 2012: 242). How Mary knew these Koreans could speak English if they did not try was not discussed. The setting of her comments about those who speak English well is also not explicitly clear. The beginning of (3) places this anecdote in 1960s rural Korea, so the assumption is that this remains the same at the end of this excerpt.

(3) **Mary:** But most Korean people, even they have uh doctor's degree they don't how to speaking English. But they know how to writing. They know how to reading well.

MK: Oh.

Mary: But they cannot speaking English. They don't know- I don't know because of they are too shy or they didn't practice. I think most time they didn't practice speaking out, but nowadays they changed lot. **But when I was grow up that time, high educated people even they know how to writing English very well and reading English very well, but they couldn't speaking English.**

MK: What does it mean when you say they couldn't speak English? Can you describe it?

Mary: Uh, they don't understand you know conversation. They don't know how to conversation. They are too shy to conversation because of they thinking they gonna be wrong sentence and then they thinking they gonna miss word and then it's gonna be **broken English**. They don't want to shame themselves.

MK: Oh.

Mary: But speaking English very well, it's when they marry with American guy. They don't even writing very well or reading very well, but they know how to speaking English and then they understood how- someone speaking English. But high education- educated they know how to s-writing well speaking I mean uh reading well, but it's uh cannot speaking English well that's Korean people uh problem.

What Mary depicts well in these excerpts is the differing strengths of elite versus naturalistic bilinguals. While elite bilinguals had power and prestige through their degrees, well-paying jobs, etc. they were unable to engage their English skills actively, contrary to expectations. The naturalistic bilinguals Mary mentions comprise a marginalized group of less educated Korean women married to American men, not anticipated to speak English better than the social elites. These women were presumably less preoccupied with losing face due to their already low social status and thus, had less hesitation practicing active English skills; and/or their living situations required they speak English regularly, forcing them to overcome whatever inhibitions they may have had.

To sum up, Mary uses this term in two different contexts: in (2), she identifies speakers of *broken English* in early 1980s Korea to be low level and less educated; in (3) she identifies speakers of *broken English* in 1960s Korea to be highly educated and proficient in reading and writing. Both excerpts link *broken English* expressly to conversational skills. The characteristics of *broken English* in (2) are associated with speaker behavior and wholly

nonlinguistic, serving as a judgment of the speakers rather than the language they speak.

Mary herself is part of the marginalized group she describes in (3), and after this exchange, she says she can speak and understand English thanks to her long-term, consistent exposure to American TV and native English speakers in the US. She asserts herself as a legitimate authority in a position to judge the Englishes of all aforementioned groups because of her regular contact with native speaker English. The normative social hierarchy with the highly educated as the powerful is then flipped on its head in this one regard per her account. Based on these comments and her descriptions of broken English above, one expects Mary to view her English skills somewhat positively, but this is not the case. The criteria she has detailed up to this point in the interview do not apply to her own self-perceptions, and especially not when she is situated in an English dominant society.

5.2 Describing one's own nonnative English

Most *broken English* instances in this data involve the participants referencing their own English. Though I ask all participants for their past and present perceptions of Koreans' English, most do not label it *broken English*. This term is seemingly reserved for self-judgments.

As mentioned earlier, despite previously stating that marginalized Koreans like her speak English well, Mary calls her language *broken English* at the end of the interview, seen in (4). The key to this negative self-perception is the new frame of reference. Mary compared elite Korean bilinguals to naturalistic Korean bilinguals in (3), but now that she is in an English-dominant society, she undoubtedly compares her English to an idealized native speaker. Her reference here to *American* presumes native speaker status, generally corresponding to how monolingual, native English-speaking White Americans view and refer to themselves in Shuck (2006). That 'American' and 'native English speaker' here, and in much of this interview data, refer to someone who is both, affirms Mary's out-group membership.

A positive tone is also present in (4) that is not seen in other instances of this term. It may appear to be a positive use of *broken English* at first glance; however, it is the reaction of the American to her *broken English* that is positive, and not Mary's English. The unspoken norm in such interactions, briefly contrasted to my own experiences as a nonnative German speaker living in Germany, is for native speakers to be unkind. The opposite occurs, deeming Mary's experiences atypical. The power in these exchanges clearly lies with the native speaker to dictate the mood. No linguistic characteristics are mentioned, but Mary's *broken English* must be comprehensible for Americans to be able to respond and help.

(4) MK: And when you were out in public in the US speaking English, doing everything, how did you feel?

Mary: I have no problem! I enjoyed. I enjoyed. And American was very kind. And then whatever I, you know, **broken English**, they kindly answer and then responds very well. So, I'm really happy. I

never had, you know, depress or uh you know make- make me upset. That kind of stuff. I don't have at all.

MK: Oh my gosh. Not like me [when I speak German]!

Mary: I know. I have uh good time because of- Sometimes, you know, I lost somewhere and then go to gas station, ask them and they answer kindly and then I'm happy. No problem at all.

Of all participants, Jennifer has the least regular contact with native English speakers. She explains this in (5) to justify the *broke English* she speaks. Jennifer, unlike the other women participants, is not married to an American. She married a Korean man in Seoul, and they immigrated to the US together where most of her family already resided. Her family communicates in Korean, and she only uses English at work with customers and a few coworkers in her family's Korean restaurant. Jennifer describes having a limited vocabulary because she uses the same words over and over in this fixed setting, similar to the shopkeepers Grace described in (1). To her, this does not qualify as 'good English'. She makes no mention of other linguistic characteristics.

(5) MK: So, when you got to the US, how often did you use it [English]?

Jennifer: Only just speeching [sic] **broke English** haha.

MK: Broken?

Jennifer: Not good English. You know, **broke English**.

MK: I don't think it's broken!

Jennifer: No, the- because especially me. It's all family Korean and even rest- I work the restaurant, you know? About half – most people Korean, too.

MK: Oh okay.

Jennifer: So, I about chance to talking English only customer and, you know, the only- the same word over over again you know? That's why I'm not really uh learn lot. Like, I tried to go to school couple years.

Matt is the most educated participant in this study and came to the US comparatively young. It is not surprising that, as he says in (6), he thought of himself as a foreigner who spoke *broken English* while attending American high school. He had just arrived then and understood very little English. Matt had mostly Korean friends in high school, so he spoke Korean with them and at home with his family. English was only necessary in the classroom and Matt says his English improved slowly for this reason. He does not specify any linguistic features of his *broken English*. His memories of that time are strongly tied to feelings of linguistic insecurity.

(6) MK: Uh so how much K- English were you speaking at that time then [in high school in the US]? Was it like just like half and half or not even because-

Matt: Only thing I can say is that I wasn't sure of my English skill. Like, I always thought myself as a f- um I don't know foreigner or I speak **broken English**.

MK: Really?

Matt: Yeah. When I- when I was in high school or after graduated high school, I always thought myself as like, I still speak **broken English**.

Matt claims to still speak some extent of *broken English* today in (7). Irrespective of the decades he has lived in the US, his increased use of English and high level of education, his linguistic insecurity has not subsided. Matt admits plainly that his judgment is based on a comparison to a perfect ideal. His linguistic self-perception can be summarized as *once a broken English speaker, always a broken English speaker*, a sentiment echoed by other participants as well. He acknowledges that his English has improved, especially after getting his master's degree, but does not characterize it further.

(7) **MK:** How did your English improve because, I mean, do you still think you speak broken English now?

Matt: Yeah, to some point. This is very- I- I don't- I've- I've never considered myself to- to speak perfect English or good English, I don't know. English is difficult to me.

MK: But I wouldn't say you speak broken English. Not at all.

Matt: Haha yeah, I mean, yeah. But I- when I- I learned- I think I improved myself- I improved a lot in English when I went to uh school h- school at uh Washington [for my master's degree].

Ji has lived in the US the longest out of all the participants. She owns a restaurant and is married to an American man. Thus, she has had the most exposure to English as well as opportunities to practice it. After explaining that she now speaks Korean more than English, contrary to a few years ago, Ji identifies the language problems she has in (8) below. To her, *broken English* relates to how fast she speaks and her age, which has changed her voice quality, making her more difficult to understand. Just like Matt, she says her English will never be good.

(8) **Ji:** [...] I had it problem with it, like my language. I talks too fast, too

MK: Oh yeah. You talk fast.

Ji: Fast. Everybody say that. So, my problem is talk fast, **broken English** and now I don't think never gonna good.

MK: What?

Ji: 'Cause you get older, you get harder, too. You know older people you can hardly understanding. Voice down. Yeah, they are.

MK: But- so, you think that you speak broken English now?

Ji: Oh, I think so. I still do.

After this exchange, Ji expresses wishing she could speak English better. When asked what she could do to achieve this goal, she replied, "All! Accent I need to practice and sentence," and then listed grammatical categories like prepositions, conjunctions and verbs. I disagree with her and offer my opinion that she does not speak *broken English* because she can communicate successfully. She concedes the point and closes this topic by saying "Still. I'm not comfortable,

put [it] that way”. So, while *broken English* is firstly associated with speech speed, Ji has a laundry list of areas for improvement, including accent and grammar. Whether improving her English in these areas will change her linguistic self-perception is unknown. As with Matt, she seems to compare herself to a nonexistent ideal.

Crystal uses *broken English* four times, the most out of all participants, and each instance refers to her own English. In (9) below, she describes moving around the world with her American military husband after getting married in Korea. Interestingly, she mentions that her son had poor English skills because he acquired her *broken English*, which refers only to speaking here. Later in the interview, Crystal shares that both of her children were bullied in school for speaking English like her. She feels at fault for their pain and expresses guilt about this, though no alternative English input was available at the time. Her husband worked long hours in the military and was not able to spend much time with the children.

- (9) **Crystal:** Then, I staying uh we- we going to Germany then we come back Georgia again I don't speak English not too much **broken English** on and off so my kid is does <unclear> English not well. Then uh 1999, my husband is war last time. Then, he quit the military. We go back to Maine.

Much later, Crystal says she learned *broken English* when she first arrived in the US, seen in (10). This is the only instance of someone *learning broken English* and she may instead be describing *speaking broken English* while learning or studying it with the private tutor her husband had hired for her at that time. Crystal's husband spoke some Korean when they first met, but he switched exclusively to English once they left Korea. Poor listening skills (“not understanding her husband”) are added to Crystal's description of her *broken English* without further details.

- (10) **Crystal:** Beginning to I come back to America. Then I was learning uh um pretty- pretty **broken English**. Just on and off I using it. Then, so my husband has a little bit better life because I don't understand what he said. Then I got mad and I get all Korean when I got swear at him, you know? Haha.

After a year of private lessons and decades of immersion, Crystal still claims to speak *broken English*. She talks at length about how much her English improved with tutoring immediately prior to (11) where her English is described as functionally better than it was upon arrival. In (11), she can converse with Americans, and they understand her. Nonetheless, she was not born in the US (“this world”) and cannot change that; so, she will never be as good at English as Americans, comparing herself to an idealized native speaker. Her use of *Americans* here is understood as representative of ‘US-born, native English-speaking Americans’ as with Mary's similar reference in (4).

- (11) **Crystal:** Yeah, I'm speaking English, still **broken English**, but I just still – you know, I can speak people um uh uh American people. They understand, so I'm done with that. I'm done. No more English

learning! Haha.

MK: Yeah <Crystal>, why do you say you speak broken English? Why do you say that?

Crystal: Well, I'm still **broken English** haha.

MK: But why? Why do you think so? I think you speak English fine if everybody understands you.

Crystal: Well, I wanted to- I wanted to straight uh just like American people, language learning, but I never gonna do that. I can't. I'm- I'm not born this world, you know. I'm born in Korea, yeah. So, that's okay. This much I- I learning English and I can speak everybody uh Korea- Eng- American people. Um that's- that's good enough.

The copular formulation of “I’m still *broken English*” is also noteworthy in its contrast to the previous utterance where that is simply what she speaks. This indicates that Crystal’s evaluation of her English is truly an evaluation of herself. The notion of *once a broken English speaker, always a broken English speaker* emerges again with nonnative speakers portrayed as particularly powerless here. Crystal has no control over where she was born, and that is the decisive factor precluding her, and others like her, from nativeness. This is indicated through the repeated use of *still* with which she describes past (and any future) attempts to improve her skills as futile. She concludes that *broken English* is good enough for her.

6 Meaning of *broken English* according to nonnative speakers

The definition of *broken English* according to the nonnative speakers in this data is not entirely consistent; previous findings from native speaker data paint a similar picture. In the fourteen total occurrences found, the meaning is always negative in its reference to deficient language skills as compared to ‘perfect English’. Idealized English is openly discussed at times and not an unnamed norm, as is generally the case in native speaker data. Matt identifies it precisely as “perfect English or good English” in (7). None of the self-proclaimed *broken English* speakers view or portray their English positively, nor is the *broken English* of other nonnative speakers painted in a positive light.

The term is predominantly associated with speaking and secondarily with listening skills. Reading and writing skills are not included as part of the *broken English* repertoire. As Mary describes in (3), *broken English* speakers can be fully proficient in reading and writing. Lindemann and Moran (2017: 654) observe several references to and samples of alleged written *broken English* in the corpora. Genre may help explain the absence of written *broken English* in this study’s data. The corpora data include edited and unedited written texts of genres such as academic English and blogs, unlike this interview data. Using written methods to collect data for the current study may have yielded slightly different results by attracting participant attention to the written form. Importantly, this study’s participants do not seem to correlate *broken English* to unintelligibility. All instances describe language that is understood at least in part by the interlocutors, again similar to findings in previous research. Just two rather

incomprehensible examples of *broken English* were attested in Lindemann and Moran (cf. 2017: 654) and this was due to lack of background knowledge and the illegibility of a handwritten letter.

This data outlines a wide range of features that comprise *broken English*, including missing words in (3), restricted vocabulary in (1) and (5), speed in (8) and voice quality in (8), all traits consistent with native speaker commentary provided in Lindemann (2005). The selection of linguistic features associated with it, if any are at all, varies according to the labeler, the speaker described and the context. *Broken English* can be linguistically vague or embody an unlimited combination of features. Thus, its meaning when used by nonnative speakers is similarly nebulous as when used by native speakers.

Though linguistic features that manifest as *broken English* change to suit whatever context, the social characteristics of a *broken English* speaker remain constant. The term always refers to the English of a nonnative speaker. The participants do not use this term for native speaker English at all; a native speaker ideal is a regular reference point from which *broken English* differs, most evident in Crystal's reluctant acceptance of her forever *broken English* in (11). All in all, the meaning of *broken English* according to these nonnative speakers is essentially a spoken, comprehensible, nonnative English that somehow deviates from an idealized standard.

The consistency with which this term is used for nonnative speakers coincides with the belief that *once a broken English speaker, always a broken English speaker*. This resurfaces in multiple narratives, namely those of Matt, Ji and Crystal. Crystal states in (11) that she cannot change where she was born, so she cannot change her *broken English*. Ji expresses still wanting to try and better her *broken English* in (8), while Crystal has given up. Both describe having improved their English proficiency over time, as does Matt, though all three claim to speak *broken English* today. This corresponds to the term's ambiguous meaning, allowing it to apply to noticeably, structurally different English idiolects. So, while these three participants currently speak *broken English*, it is less broken than before, though still within the term's purview. An interesting topic of further research would be to determine whether speakers cognitively perceive any gradations or finer-grained distinctions among different *broken English* idiolects, and if these exhibit any regularity.

7 Function of *broken English* according to nonnative speakers

The basic function of *broken English* is to describe, although it is a negative descriptor often used to criticize, judge and evaluate someone's English. Contrary to previous research, supposedly neutral or positive uses of the term were not observed. Such uses were seen in corpora data where the language of high-status, foreign-born celebrities was described as 'broken' to lower their status and make them more relatable (cf. Lindemann and Moran 2017:

670). The participants in this study are already low status and as foreign-born Asian Americans, are members of a marginalized minority in the US. The participants are both labelers and recipients of this descriptor while using it in conversation with one interviewer. That they do not use the term the same way journalists do when attempting neutrality while writing a news story, for example, makes sense (cf. Lindemann and Moran 2017: 662-663).

Labeling someone's language *broken English* highlights their "otherness" in this data as well as in native speaker data (cf. Lindemann and Moran 2017: 657). The references Mary and Crystal make to *Americans* in (4) and (11) respectively, clearly exclude themselves. They do not seem to consider themselves Americans at all, despite their citizenship. Shuck (2006) has already shown how monolingualist ideology in the US allows for the categories 'US-born', 'native English speaking' and 'White' to stand in for each other. Devos and Banaji (2005)'s study investigating the link between ethnic group and the category 'American' similarly found that to be American is implicitly synonymous with being White. Mary and Crystal seem to have internalized this. So, the use of *broken English* underscores the described speaker's "otherness" as the category of 'American' is equated with US-born, White, native speaker status.

8 Conclusion

Returning to the research questions, the meaning and function of *broken English* according to these nonnative speakers broadly matches what has been observed in previous research. *Broken English* is a nebulous and versatile concept, applicable wherever the labeler's extralinguistic goals permit. The term functions as a negative descriptor, though nearly all instances surpass plain description to criticize a speaker's language. Not all instances of *broken English* in Lindemann and Moran (2017) are as explicitly negative as here. Their spontaneous web data, also intended for a small, restricted audience, exhibits similarly negative uses of the term. Instances from highly edited data are less overtly negative and even seem neutral. Genre and intended audience are hence responsible for this slight discrepancy. The only constants with this term relate to its negative connotation and the described speaker who is always nonnative. As seen in Lindemann and Moran (2017) with native speaker data, nonnative speakers emphasize their "otherness" when using this term. They position themselves in contrast to Americans, implying that Americans are US-born, White, native English speakers. While an unnamed norm is usually the reference point in native speaker data, some participants in the current study identified the norm explicitly. In this way, *broken English* as attested in these interviews maintains the existing hegemony of an idealized standard against which nonnative Englishes are measured and easily fall short, also entrenching the native versus nonnative speaker dichotomy. *Broken English* conclusively emerges as an ideologically encoded term, no matter the labeler.

It is of note that these interviews exemplify breaches of one of Lindemann and Moran (2017: 666-667)'s four mechanisms that naturalize standard language ideology: *failure to observe and/or challenge this lack of precision of that language*. Asking what exactly *broken English* refers to along with encouraging commentary call direct attention to the term's imprecision. This also exposes the formerly unnamed norms that exist in opposition to *broken English*. My authority and position as a native English speaker interviewer were employed in these efforts to disrupt unchecked notions of 'perfect English'. Such confrontations with tenets of standard language ideology threaten its stronghold and help shift language attitudes. This may, in turn, alter the actions of speakers and help reduce the linguistic discrimination that marginalized groups, like nonnative speakers in the US, experience.

A question of whether reclamation of this term by nonnative speakers occurs, or is even possible, arose during initial inspection of Mary's remarks in (4) and Crystal's in (11). The more positive tone of (4) was so unexpected that one may misinterpret Mary as happy, or even proud, of her English. Crystal's unenthusiastic recognition of her English as 'broken' could also be misconstrued as active consent or approval to describe her English accordingly. But these speakers do not engage in any reclamation in these excerpts. Gathering and analyzing more data to see if nonnative speakers do reappropriate this term for their own benefit, as an in-group marker for instance, is a worthwhile future endeavor in addition to more studies on nonnative speaker perceptions of *broken English* in general.

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