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# Recycling mediatized personae across participation frameworks<sup>\*</sup>

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## 1. Introduction

The papers in this volume discuss forms of semiotic mediation that unfold through mediatized texts (newspapers, anime, movies, reality TV), focusing especially on diacritics of social personae that are animated and re-animated through textual encounters.<sup>1</sup> It is therefore useful to locate these papers at the intersection of three questions:

- (1) How do mediatized texts make social personae available to audiences?
- (2) How are these personae recycled from prior discourses into mediatized texts?
- (3) How are they recycled into activity frames in social life?

## 2. Audiences and target markets

The first question requires attention to the target market design of the mediatized text. Any mediatized artifact is a commodity designed for sale to a target market. It also has a textual design, a genre organization and an addressivity to an audience. For instance, the Japanese anime series *Cowboy Bebop* (Hiramoto) is of an entertainment genre targeted to young heterosexual adults. It employs everyday registers of Japanese as elements of character design and, by troping on the stereotypic values of register fractions, formulates hybrid personae designed to appeal to its young audience. By contrast, the Korean news genre on which Park focuses, “English learning success stories,” formulates the English language as a commodity register for Koreans by linking English to occupational and commercial success

in Korea (Agha in press). The newspapers in which the news genre occurs are conservative national dailies with a 75% market share of the news readership; they are oriented to elite commercial interests and the nation's competitiveness in the global economy. The news genre is a mediatized metadiscourse which assigns a foreign language a market value in Korea, and formulates it as a stereotypic indexical of class distinction. Metapragmatic typifications (phrases like "legitimate English" or "high quality English") are used to describe proficiency in English through success stories of register attainment by Korean elites, thus linking ownership of the commodity to achievable occupational positions, formulating English as an instrument of class mobility in Korea.

How is the exemplary Korean speaker of English typified in this mediatized genre? Through news stories. For whom? For newspaper readers. What do these news stories do? They contain narrated speech events. What happens in them? Metapragmatic typifications abound in which a narrated character, the "featured learner," is formulated *both* as *high-ranking Korean* and as *exemplary speaker of English*. For example, in the narrated speech event in which Ms. Barshefsky is represented as asking Mr. Han "where did you learn such high quality English?," the ventriloquated question formulates Mr. Han as an exemplary speaker for a newspaper readership. Rank asymmetries in the narrated speech event diagram rank asymmetries in the event of newspaper reading. Ms. Barshefsky out-ranks Mr. Han by criteria of native speaker proficiency, and Mr. Han out-ranks most readers by criteria of professional attainment. When she formulates him as a speaker of high-quality English, her native proficiency confers legitimacy on his attained proficiency. He is now available as an exemplary persona for the newspaper reader, at once a model of linguistic and occupational attainment.

In discussing the newspaper texts through which this register formulation becomes known to a population of speakers, Park focuses only on a phase or segment of the social process through which this register has a social life in Korea, a phase analogous to the 19th century formulation of British Received Pronunciation (RP) as a register of class mobility in England through mediatized texts such as Newspapers and Penny Weeklies (Agha 2007, ch. 4). As I show in the RP case, considering the larger speech chain process helps us see that exemplary speakers, repertoires, enregistered values, and the social domain of enregisterment were all transformed over a historical process through the activities of social persons linked to each other through it. Although Park does not discuss the diverse social settings in which "good English" functions as a social indexical in Korean society, he does make clear how a single mediatized genre personifies English (and its Korean users) within a space of characterological contrasts. These personae are potentially available for uptake and recycling in subsequent activities in social life.

But what happens off the page? How do depictions of rank in the news genre inform class asymmetries in Korean society? As in the British case of RP, class structure is here reproduced asymmetrically through a commodity chain. Although English is commoditized as a register of white collar job placement in Korea, and although this indexical value becomes known to anyone who reads the paper, the valued commodity is only purchasable by attending language schools. Although the newspaper genre locates Korean personae associated with exemplary English within a classification of social types — they contrast, for instance, with defective personae associated with those who speak Konglish (a blend of Korean and English) — no reader can, of course, learn good English through news stories written in Korean. The competence to speak in this register requires appropriate English language schooling. Park notes that such schooling is “prohibitively costly for working class families and even for middle class families.” Fluency in the register thus remains a restricted commodity, recognized as valuable (through newspapers) by more people than can afford it (through schooling). A class structure is potentially reproduced and maintained through an emblem of class distinction. And insofar as the emblem is associated with English, local social aspirations to success (of those who seek employment) are linked to global economic aspirations (of those who provide it). Figurements of linguistic and professional competence within Korea are thereby incorporated in a trans-local neoliberal imaginary, and local participation frameworks (and the aspirations that unfold within them) are assimilated into more global commodity chains.

### 3. Troping on stereotypic inputs

Let us now turn to the second question: How are social personae recycled into mediatized texts from prior discourses? The Singaporean case discussed by Lazar provides an interesting contrast to the Japanese case discussed by Hiramoto.

In the case discussed by Hiramoto, register and dialect contrasts within everyday spoken Japanese are important source materials in mediatized depictions of social personae. The discursive elements of character design in *Cowboy Bebop* are Japanese speech registers that index nation, class, and gender contrasts (Standard Japanese, men’s language, women’s language respectively), as well as regional dialects that are enregistered in that national imaginary as extra-normative in contrast to Standard Japanese, and thus contrastively linked to sub-standard social personae (rural vs. urban, working class vs. middle class, less vs. more educated people). These register contrasts are troped upon in various ways in the mediatized text, but we cannot understand the significance of these mediatized tropes without first noting that registers are inputs to tropes in non-mediatized discourses too.

I have argued elsewhere that any register routinely provides inputs to tropes in everyday life (Agha 2007, ch. 3): Uses of women's registers by men, or of adult speech by children (or vice versa), or of honorific registers in acts of veiled aggression are cross-linguistically commonplace as entextualized tropes, even though indexical stereotypes associated with source registers are often taken to imply — particularly in decontextualized reflection about lexemic fragments of a register — that such language use does not occur, or occurs only in the speech of stigmatized others (Agha 1998).

In *Cowboy Bebop*, register mediated tropes become instruments of **character design**: contrasts among registers motivate social-interpersonal contrasts among the anime's characters. Main protagonists speak Standard Japanese, side characters are assigned non-Standard dialects and non-normative personae. The register called *Hakasego* 'scientist speech' is used for knowledgeable old men unless they are villains or foreigners. Foreigners are differentiated further by similar techniques: Japanese disfluency plus Chinese word borrowings index a Chinese character (the bartender), English borrowings typical of the register of *Seiyōjingo* 'westerner's language' formulate a character like Andy as "Caucasian"; and stereotypically Native American idioms and locutionary styles animate the othering of the medicine man (Laughing Bull).

The Singaporean case discussed by Lazar highlights the role of institutional value projects in formulating texts that recycle social personae. The Singaporean state routinely employs public relations methods to pursue campaigns of "public education" through diverse mediatized texts that are delivered to the public via venues such as TV, and are designed to promote specific outcomes in diverse areas of everyday life. In the two campaigns she discusses — one on public health, one on courtesy in public life — Lazar focuses on the incorporation into textual design of a particular media personality, a television character named Phua Chu Kang (PCK), who becomes an intermediary of the State's public relations efforts. How is this persona constituted and deployed? He is known as a comical figure from the sitcom that originally brought him to national prominence. And he has a narrow register range, speaking always in an informal conversational style, regardless of the social setting in which he finds himself. He also speaks Singlish, a colloquial variety of Singaporean English (with borrowings from Malay and Chinese), which is heavily stigmatized in other campaigns through which the Singaporean State seeks to promote Standard English.

When PCK's colloquial persona is preserved in the State's "public courtesy" campaign, he is formulated as an ordinary, everyday person, and this formulation bespeaks a particular addressee design. He speaks for the State as a spokesman for its public courtesy campaign, but not in the voice of the State. Rather than speaking as the State does to its subjects (in Standard English), he speaks in a vernacular

and colloquial English, peppered with Singlish, in which members of the public can imagine themselves speaking to each other. One participation framework reanimates the discursive design (and personae) of another. But when he speaks Singlish while speaking for the State, does he not undermine the State's Standard language policy?

The way in which Singlish is recycled into his speech prevents this effect, and does so in two ways. First, the lexical and stylistic repertoires of Singlish are greatly muted and reduced when he speaks — or, rather, sings — for the courtesy campaign's music video. This reduced and fragmentary Singlish suffices to index the voice of the public to the public, though this voice is also muted here by the relative infrequency of Singlish tokens (compared to actual everyday speech). Second, Singlish is fragmentarily preserved in addressee design, but not at all in replication design. The lyrics of the music video are designed to be repeated by viewers who are invited to sing along. But the text-segments of the video that viewers are invited to reproduce through their own singing contains no Singlish whatsoever. They are to sing in Standard English. The music video is a State-sponsored mediatized text whose addressee design is based on recycling everyday speech and its personae. But in modeling the subsequent behavior of its addressees, it ventriloquates onto their lips personae that are sponsored by the State.

#### 4. Uptake in social interaction

Tropic transformations refashion social possibilities by creating new inputs to uptake. Hiramoto notes that *Cowboy Bebop's* main protagonists are given Standard Japanese voices, even if they are Singapore-born (Faye), or working class (V.T). The anime's textual form therefore links Standard Japanese to social categories of which it is not stereotypically indexical. When it is used by the anime's main protagonists, Standard Japanese is linked to their *other* visible and audible characteristics, and hence to their co-textually configured personae (Agha 2007: 159–165), some of which (foreign birth, low class) are simply inconsistent with widespread stereotypes about the Standard Language, while others (bounty hunting, violence, ambiguous gender) are actually stigmatized by adult speakers of the Standard. The mediatized text's character design formulates its indexical selectivity for a distinct — younger — target market: Three of the four main characters are young people, whose presence in the anime formulates its addressivity to a teenage or twenty-something audience. Standard Japanese provides a figurement of normality to characters who are extra-normative from the standpoint of adult society, but altogether “cool” in entertainment genres designed for the anime's target market, which includes young people of the urban (Tokyo) middle class. The figurement

of young bounty hunters speaking Standard Japanese, which is stereotypically spoken best in Tokyo, is therefore a highly motivated trope of addressee design. Since enregistered voices are only encountered as fragments of entextualized voices (Agha 2005), entextualized tropes of these kinds open up new possibilities for uptake and response in everyday life too.

How do members of the target market recycle *Cowboy Bebop* personae in their own activities? We don't know because Hiramoto does not explore this issue in her discussion. But let us at least consider what is *made available for uptake* by these tropic formulations. What can be recycled here is not just the idea that Standard Japanese is a hegemonic standard but also the extra-normative aspects of its anime speakers (e.g., Ed's gender ambiguity, Faye's con-artist persona, addiction to gambling and penchant for street-fighting). And recycling is not reducible to "imitation." Indeed, the ways in which these personae can be recycled include (1) activities like performing persona fractions by performing register fragments; (2) activities like performing counter-persona and hybrid analogues through entextualized tropes; and (3) activities that depend not on deploying such personae but on *talking about them*, as when talk about mediatized characters enables forms of interpersonal footing in everyday life, e.g., in talk of why one loves or hates Ed and someone else doesn't, why one would never want one's best friend to be like Spike, and so on.

The question of how mediatized personae are recycled into subsequent discourses emerges in the papers by Furukawa and by Wahl. Despite apparent differences of content, both papers explore the recycling of stereotypic personae from source discourses into interactional tropes that yield footings and alignments among current participants.

Let's begin with Furukawa's paper. Although most media research confines itself to so-called "content analysis" of media texts, Furukawa discusses interpersonal alignments between media personae and those who respond to them as viewers or hearers. One of the media texts that Furukawa investigates is a comedy skit by Augie T, originally performed at a hotel in Honolulu before an audience of 70–80 people. The comedy routine animates ethnic personae that are sourced from racial stereotypes and made available as ethnic humor. Furukawa's paper describes the subsequent metapragmatic commentary on this skit by participants in a focus group. The issue of ethnicity is flagged by the comedy skit itself. What is interesting here, however, is the reluctance of the focus group participants to discuss their own views of racially charged ethnic humor, and their approach to getting around needing to do so.

When these Hawaii residents, who are not themselves black, are asked about their views on ethnic humor, a mediatized figure — Barack Obama — is conjured as the imaginary respondent to this question, a figure safely distinct — and corporeally distant — from the focus group participants who animate it. But Obama

must first himself be reformulated before his ventriloquated opinions about ethnic humor can be pressed into service. He is reformulated from being a *biographic individual* into a *social character type* (Agha 2005), one from whom most features of his biographic individuality are effaced (the lawyer, the social worker, the president) and only two features, namely his ethnicity and his “local boy” aspect, are left salient. These are precisely those fragments of the Obama persona that are most relevant to ventriloquating him as respondent to the question. His ethnicity is convenient because if a black man is likely to enjoy racial humor, it is safe for white people to do so. His locale-specificity is convenient because if someone who lived in Hawaii for many years (such as himself) can enjoy such humor, anyone having the same category membership (the same locale specificity) can safely enjoy it too. This allows the focus group members (who share his locale specificity but not his race) to avoid answering the question themselves; they are able, instead, to animate a character type who enjoys it, and by using fragments of the Obama persona to formulate the character type, they are able to align themselves with the character type they animate, without fully inhabiting it.

If Furukawa discusses uptake of mediatized texts by focus groups, Wahl discusses uptake in subsequent mediatized texts. And just as Furukawa’s respondents transform the figures they recycle, so do the characters in the films and reality TV shows discussed by Wahl.

The case which Wahl discusses involves personae sourced from American youth slang and from mediatized texts (films) that recycle such slang in the service of character depiction, making versions of it widely known through their own dissemination. What Wahl calls “metastereotyping” is a cyclic recontextualization of enregistered diacritics and personae (Agha 2007, ch. 5) across participation frameworks, of which Wahl discusses three. There is the ‘cool’ of American youth slang, a register of peer-group footing in the US, which changes very rapidly; there is the mediatized speech of the main characters in *Bill and Ted’s Excellent Adventure*, who make a small sample of such youth slang internationally known in the 1990s, thus transforming the social regularity in its most widely known form — by reducing its repertoires (to fragments of US slang), expanding its social domain (the film has a global market), and adding to its stereotypic personae (which now include Bill and Ted); and, finally, there is Rico and Munya in Africa, on reality TV, putting mediatized Bill and Ted characters — and the slang sourced from them, which they transform, again, in repertoire and persona characteristics — to good interpersonal use.

*Bill and Ted’s* “California slacker youth” (along with analogues like *Ridgemont High’s* “surfer dude”) are stereotypic personae well known among American youth populations and elsewhere. Bill and Ted have many virtues, but being super-smart is not among them. What’s very useful about them, however, is that they are

mediatized figures linked to linguistic and kinesic repertoires. They can thus be re-animated by performing them.

Rico and Munya do the same when they attempt to seem attractive to Hazel, who states plainly that she doesn't date "men who are too smart." In their concerted effort to achieve performed dim-wittedness for Hazel's hand, Rico and Munya find that Bill and Ted are handy source personae indeed — though most features of their biographic individuality (as movie characters) are now irrelevant. What is relevant is Bill and Ted's speech and demeanor, and their stereotypically dim-witted personae, which are hyper-stylized in Rico and Munya's performance with back-to-back tokens of "dude" for Hazel's benefit, even if, as they appear to concede, their efforts at dim-wittedness fall short of getting a date.

Once we see that the repertoires associated with register models of speech and other conduct include semiotically *diverse* signs (lexemes, speech styles, kinesic demeanors, etc.), whose social domain is mediated by indexical stereotypes, including those circulated through mediatized discourses, register models and their tropic deployments become socially locatable as objects of ethnographic investigation. And ethnographic observation makes plain that the co-existence of distinct models of the same repertoire is not only routine everywhere, but the transformation of models and the competition between variant models within and across activity frames is the very stuff of social life.

## Notes

\* Discussant's comments on papers presented in the panel "Media intertextualities: Semiotic Mediation across time and space," 108th annual meeting, American Anthropological Association, Philadelphia, December 5, 2009

1. See list of paper titles and authors at the end of this document.

## Papers under commentary

Furukawa, Toshiaki. 'Intertextuality, mediation, and members' categories in focus groups on humor.'

Hiramoto, Mie. 'Anime and intertextualities: Hegemonic identities in *Cowboy Bebop*'

Lazar, Michelle M. 'Performing the "lifeworld" in public education campaigns: Media interdiscursivity and social governance.'

Park, Joseph S. 'Images of "good English" in the Korean conservative press: Three processes of interdiscursivity.'

Wahl, Alexander. 'The global metastereotyping of Hollywood 'Dudes': African reality television parodies of mediatized California style.'

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