A Sociolinguistic Qualitative Study on Working Women's Identity Construction through Voiceovers in Television

Jiaqi Zeng

Georgetown University, Washington D.C. 20057, USA

Abstract: To explore how a working woman constructs her "social identity" (Ochs, 1993), this article unfolds the woman's inner thoughts through the voiceovers in a Korean television drama, built upon Elinor Ochs' theory of identity construction through social "acts" – socially recognized, goal-directed behavior –and "stances" – a display of a socially recognized point of view or attitude. This article is expanded into a multilayered research on the feminist and cultural understanding of the female protagonist's voiceover in the drama. The first layer starts from the voiceover's techniques – the role of the voiceovers – in constructing the social identity of the female protagonist from a feminist perspective. Then it goes further to explore the linguistic strategies applied to the construction of a working woman's identity living in the dilemma of work and family.

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Purposes

The purpose of this qualitative study is to investigate how a working woman constructs her "social identity" (Ochs, 1993) by unfolding her inner thoughts through the voiceovers in a Korean television drama. Under the cultural constraints in South Korean society, "dominant patriarchal ideology" (Kim, 2005), and the stress of work-life balance, the female protagonist in the Korean TV drama is a mirror of the working women in real-life.

There has been a great number of studies on feminist discourse represented in Korean television dramas, but few of them are focusing on the female protagonists' voiceovers, which is a deeper and more thorough exploration of working women's socialization from the internal version of self. This project is expanded into a multilayered research on the feminist and cultural understanding of the female protagonist's voiceover in Korean television drama, *Misty* (2018). The first layer starts from the voiceover's techniques – the role of the voiceovers – in constructing the social identity of the female protagonist from a feminist perspective. Then it goes further to explore the linguistic strategies applied to the construction of a working woman's identity living in the dilemma of work and family.

1.2 Rationale: Voiceover (Also Known as Internal Diegetic Sound)

Focusing on the voiceover of the female protagonist in a 2018 Korean television drama Misty, this project delves into the role of voiceovers in constructing the social identity of the female protagonist from a feminist perspective by looking at the content of the female protagonist's voiceovers. Voiceover is also known as "internal diegetic sound", defined as "sound represented as coming from the mind of a character within the story space" (Bordwell, 1985; Thompson, 1993). From the female protagonist's voiceover, the audience can perceive the most "subjective and limited instance" of her (McHugh, 2001).

2. Conceptual Framework

Built upon Bakhtin's notion of "dialogicality"/ "dialogism", the notion of bivocality (or double-voiced discourse), which, according to Bakhtin: ''inevitably arises under conditions of dialogic interaction'' (Bakhtin, 1984), Tovares (2010) refers to "self-talk" – reflected by voiceovers in television shows – as "a dialogic phenomenon that is foundational to the construction of […] identity". This echoes with Ochs's theory of "social identity construction", which is fundamental and crucial to this project (Ochs, 1993).

On the one hand, self is the essential part of identity, and Ochs emphasizes the relationship between "narrative" and "self"; "narrative and self are inseparable" (Ochs & Capps, 1996), "personal narrative can be considered a fruitful site for investigating the self, including different versions of the self" (Ochs, 1993). Here, voiceover is deemed as one of the forms of "personal narrative", which supports this project on investigating the female protagonist's "different versions of the self". On the other hand, regarding the process of social identity construction, according to Ochs, more specifically, there are "social acts" performed and "stances" "verbally displayed" (Ochs, 1993). "'Social act' means any socially recognized, goal-directed behavior, such as making a request, contradicting another person, or interrupting someone" (Ochs, 1990), and "'Stance' means a display of a socially recognized point of view or attitude" (Biber & Finegan, 1989; Ochs & Schieffelin, 1989; Ochs, 1993). In this project, the female protagonist, Hye-ran's voiceovers' "acts" are closely related to the "stances".

3. Research Questions

A research question is proposed based on the cultural context and linguistic theoretical framework : How does a working woman construct her social identity through the "acts" and "stances" (according to Ochs' theory) represented by the female protagonist's voiceover in Korean television drama Misty (2018) ?

4. Methodology

The research question is built on Ochs' theory of social identity construction and focused on the "acts" and "stances" represented and embodied in the female protagonist's voiceovers. To answer this question, I looked through the whole Korean television drama and the unit of analysis consists of the transcription of every voiceover of the female protagonist – every time when there is a diegetic sound of her expressing her inner thoughts without speaking to any other characters – throughout the 16 episodes (1 hour/ episode) of Misty (2018). The translation is combined by a reference to viki.com – the biggest American video website for streaming Asian TV shows – and subtle adjustment in order to get the precise translation. A spreadsheet is created with a record of the point-in-time of every voiceover, by counting the frequency of particularly the female protagonist's voiceovers and observe the importance of the roles of voiceovers in this Korean television drama. With a focus on the "acts" and "stances", which are corresponded to each other,

the voiceovers are coded into categories based on Ochs theory of "Constructing Social Identity" (Ochs, 1993), "intrapersonally and interpersonally" (Tovares, 2010). There are four acts of the voiceover: (1) questions, (2) querying others, (3) introspections, and (4) real thoughts. The actions of questions and querying others are in part "intrapersonal" dialogue, according to Tovares (2010) that are closely related to others' reactions; while the introspections are "intrapersonal" (Tovares, 2010). Then, there are corresponding "stances" according to Ochs: (1) self-uncertainty (uncertainties that can't be told), (2) self-assertiveness, (3) self-discipline, (4) ambitiousness.

4.1 Data Collection: Voiceovers of the Female Protagonist in Misty (2018)

All the voiceovers are collected from Misty (2018). Misty was aired by JTBC from Feb 2nd to Mar 24th in 2018, gaining a recorded 8.452% nationwide rating. It powerfully challenges dominant patriarchal ideologies by representing the female protagonist, Go Hye-ran, as a high-flying woman in her career – the nation's top anchor-woman of JBC News Nine – and an ideal image of a modern woman, just what the other women want to be. However, this impeccable woman becomes the prime suspect in a murder case, and her husband Kang Tae-wook ends up becoming her legal counsel despite the fact that their marriage is on the rocks. Go Hye-ran, as the female protagonist, is portrayed as a highly assertive and ambitious woman, will pay every effort to achieve her goal. Her characteristic defines her inconsistency between her actions and thoughts, which highlights the importance of the voiceover which states her real thoughts underlying her actions.

5. Analysis

5.1 Frequency of Voiceovers

Among the 16 episodes (1 hour/episode), there are 27 voiceovers – exclusively the female protagonist's inner thoughts or narrations – in total. By comparing the numbers of these voiceovers showing up in every episode, I found there are three peaks respectively in group (E01, E02, and E03), (E09, E10, and E11), and (E14, E15, E16), which are in line with the plot climax of the drama as a whole – the beginning, the late middle, and the ending part. In this television melodrama, climaxes are mostly represented as conflicts, which come along with the crisis or struggling of the female protagonist. It is usually put more effort in depicting a protagonist's characteristics in the midst of a conflict, supported by the peaks of the voiceover, a more salient identity of the protagonist is constructed.
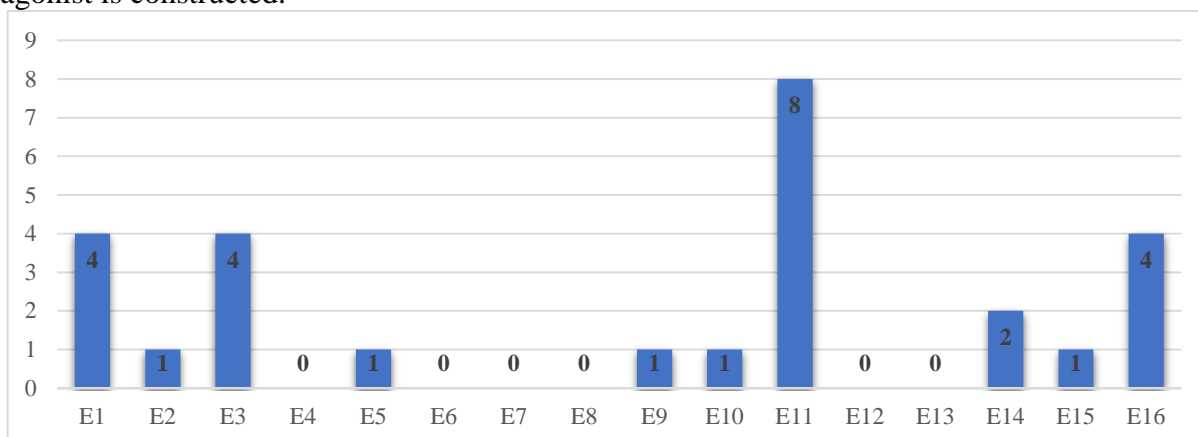

Fig.1 Numbers of Narrations in Each Episode (Female Protagonist Only)

5.2 Coding of Voiceovers

The voiceovers of the female protagonist in the drama are coded into different categories from the dimension of "acts" and "stances" based on Ochs theory of "Constructing Social Identity" (Ochs, 1993) in Table 1. There are four acts of the voiceover: (1) questions, (2) querying others, (3) introspections, and (4) real thoughts. The actions of questions and querying others are in part "intrapersonal" dialogue, according to Tovares (2010) that are closely related to others' reactions; while the introspections are "intrapersonal" (Tovares, 2010). Then, there are corresponding "stances" according to Ochs: (1) self-uncertainty (uncertainties that can't be told), (2) self-assertiveness, (3) self-discipline, (4) ambitiousness. In Table 1, the underlined lines are particularly from the female protagonist, Hye-ran, in either a real or imaginary conversation.

Table 1 Table of Coding

Coding: *Acts –Stances*	Numbers	Data
Questions - self-uncertainty (uncertainties that can't be told)	4	1.[E01, 00:33:03] Seriously, what's wrong with me? Is it a lust issue? 2.[E01, 01:07:17] Kevin Lee? 3.[E02, 00:04:09] Lee Jae Young? Jae Young. 4.[E10, 00:55:22] How? Why were you there?
Querying others – self-assertiveness	4	5.[E11, 00:57:17] (To Husband) How can this be? How could this happen so many times? 6.[E15, 01:10:12] (To Husband) Kang Tae-wook, you… What have you done to me? 7.[E16, 00:21:09] (To Eun-joo) Eun-joo: It's your fault, Go Hye-ran. Hye-ran: Why? What did I do? Eun-joo: Are you satisfied? Hye-ran: What did any of you do for me? Eun-joo: So… Are you happy now? Hye-ran: How much do any of you know... about my unhappiness? 8.[E16, 48:50] (To Husband) Tae-wook: How did we end up this way? Hye-ran: How did we come this far?
Introspections – self-discipline	11	9.[E01, 00:07:03] I must be crazy. 10.[E01, 00:33:03] Seriously, what's wrong with me? Is it a lust issue? 11.[E01, 01:03:50] (Conversation with Husband in the form of voiceover) Husband: You've reached a new low. Hye-ran: I know. Husband: How low will you go? How low are you going to go? Hye-ran: I know. 12.[E11, 00:55:47] Pull yourself together, Go Hye-ran. Pull yourself together. 13.[E11, 01:06:21] (Answering and thinking about her friend's question) Friend: Is this break up better for your sake too? Hye-ran: I…don't really know. Was it the right decision to send him away? Was it not? 14.[E11, 01:07:20] Of all the decisions that I have made… I have never questioned any of them. But, this time… I'm not so sure. Without him, will I really be okay? Without him… 15.[E14, 00:50:31] (Reflection on her previous words when talking to her friend) "It is enough now. I won't stop. Whether I'm being obsessed or not, I am

		going to succeed. Wherever it is, I'm going to go as far as I can." This is more than enough.
		16.[E14, 00:51:49] You really did work hard, Go Hye-ran.
		17.[E16, 01:09:10] Our lives will probably continue on. Though we don't know what the end brings us. We don't know where we're headed.
		18.[E16, 01:17:11] I… dreamed of happiness. It was a dream I believed that I could make come true. A happiness that I believed I would achieve.
		19.[E16, 01:21:19] (Answering the audience's question in the form of voiceover) The Audience: "Are you happy now?" Hye-ran: I had always thought that I had everything. But when I open my hand… there's nothing there.
		20.[E16, 01:24:30] Perhaps, we try to catch things that are impossible to catch. Is that why we live life like we're crazy?
Real thoughts – ambitiousness	5	21.[E03, 00:41:00] In my lives, I've been in situations like this several times. Situations where I can't go any further or back down. In those situations, I have never run or avoided them. I have faces them head-on. Either I break or you break.
		22.[E03, 00:42:28] Also I have never lost, not once.
		23.[E03, 00:48:44] I'm in a situation where I can't move forward or back down.
		24.[E03, 00:55:12] Also, I have never lost, not once.
		25.[E05, 00:25:04] He was the first person. The first person to love me, all of me, just as I am.

6. Findings

From the table above, it can be concluded that Go Hye-ran, as the female protagonist, constructs her social identity by questioning to both herself and others (these questions are secrets that she holds from other characters), making introspections, and thinking differently or more complicatedly than her seeming actions.

In the first situation, she questions herself to hold secret uncertainties from others, which indicates she is used to distance herself from others. As a socialized ambitious working woman, there are pressures urging her not to be frank with others, which is normal among modern working women handling multiple roles, for instance, a "woman" and a "working woman". In lines 2 and 3, which are both in the same scene, she is questioning "Kevin Lee?" [E01, 01:07:17] and "Lee Jae Young?" [E02, 00:04:09], as the former, "Kevin Lee", is the guest invited to her News Nine Program, and she wasn't sure if he is "Lee Jae Young", who is her ex-boyfriend. Struggling in between the roles of a top news anchor and an ex-girlfriend, she is not supposed to unfold her uncertainty in front of the public but hiding it to herself.

While questioning or querying others, she is applying the "stance" as she is the innocent side that she didn't do anything wrong, which further proves her assertiveness. From the table, I found she is mostly querying her husband, for instance, in line 5, "How can this be? How could this happen so many times?" [E11, 00:57:17] and in line 6, "What have you done to me?" [E15, 01:10:12]. These voiceovers show up when there is a conflict between her husband Tae-wook and her, and she has a strong enough internal self to be assertive that she is not the one to be blamed on.

From the statistics, we can see that she is mostly making introspection to herself, synthesizing and reflecting from the contexts, introspecting what she did and said before. For example, in line 12, she is telling herself, "Pull yourself together, Go Hye-ran. Pull yourself together. [E11, 00:55:47]" When she has to break up with her husband even if she loves him. She knows she can't be a wife who is psychologically dependent on her husband and an independent high-flying

working woman at the same time in her situation, so after she proposes breaking up with her husband in person, she locks herself in her bedroom and there's a voiceover serving as her self-discipline. This echoes with Tovares' study on athletes' "'self-talk' as a motivational and instructional tool" (Tovares, 2010) to enhance her performance of a strong working woman identity.

There are voiceovers showing her being honest to the audience instead of to the other characters in the show; there is an inconsistency of her real thoughts and her behaviors, for instance, when her ex-boyfriend – also her important guest of the program – is asking her if she loves her husband, she is not replying but being honest to the audience in the form of voiceover: "He was the first person. The first person to love me, all of me, just as I am. (E05, 00:25:04)" She is aware of his continuous affection with her and in her situation, there are consequences of her direct confession. Her voiceover is being honest to the voiceover, and in the meantime representing her own way of handling the challenges in constructing her identity of an ambitious working woman.

7. Discussion

These voiceovers are not only speaking for Hye-ran, the female protagonist, but more importantly, speaking for the female audience who are in the same situation of Hye-ran, who is struggling with different socialized roles, but striking to construct a strong working women identity; they are unfolding the challenges of women's construction of identity in a more private way. In the TV show, the voiceovers are heard by the audience, while in reality, the inner thoughts are not heard by anyone but a woman herself. Simone de Beauvoir points out in her distinguished masterwork The Second Sex (1949), "It is striking that most feminine literature is driven today by an attempt at lucidity more than by a will to make demands..." (Beauvoir, 1949). Women are faced with barriers like historic factors, social pressures, and different communicational styles across genders in gaining understanding, which leads to the result of their more "attempt at lucidity". Here in this project, the intermediate of understanding-gaining is TV shows, as George Lipsitz argues television reflects "an already ongoing unraveling of social relations in society; its narcissism serves as a salve for the wounds of everyday life" (Lipsitz, 1990). By investigating the role of popular culture – more specifically, television as a mass media – in representing feminist discourse, more understanding toward women is attained from the society. Therefore, the voiceovers in the feminist media are significant and worth scrutinized in this sense, especially when women are not willing to be frank with the society about their challenges of being a (married)woman as well as a working woman, and meanwhile, when women is lack of the societal understanding of these challenges.

References

[1]   Bakhtin, M. M., Discourse in the Novel. In M. M. Bakhtin, & M. Holquist (Ed.), The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays (C. Emerson, & M. Holquist, Trans.,). Austin: University of Texas Press. pp. 259–422, 1981.
[2]   Bakhtin, M. M., Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.
[3]   Beauvoir, S. d., The Second Sex. (C. Borde, & S. Malovany-Chevallier, Trans.) New York: Vintage, 1949.
[4]   Bordwell, D., Narration in the Fiction Film. Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1985.
[5]   Cho, Y., Park, J., Ju, B., et al. "Women Leaders' Work-Life Imbalance in South Korean Companies: A Collaborative Qualitative Study". Human Resource Development Quarterly, vol.27, no.4, pp.461-487, 2016.
[6]   Dykes, A., 'And I Started Wondering …': Voiceover and Conversation in Sex and the City. Studies in Popular Culture, vol.34, no.1, pp.49-66, 2011 Fall.
[7]   Kim, S., Feminist Discourse and the Hegemonic Role of Mass Media. Feminist Media Studies, vol.8, no.4, pp.391-406, November 17, 2008.
[8]   Kim, S., "Popular Feminism and the Hegemonic Practice of Mass Media: A Study of Two South Korean TV Dramas", International Communication Association 2005 Annual Meeting, pp. 1-31,   New York: International Communication Association, 2005.

[9]   Lin, A., & Tong, A., Crossing Boundaries: Male Consumption of Korean TV Dramas and Negotiation of Gender Relations in Modern Day Hong Kong. Journal of Gender Studies, vol.16, no.3, pp.217-232, November 2007.

[10] Lipsitz, G., Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990.

[11] McHugh, K. A., "Sounds that Creep Inside You": Female Narration and Voiceover in the Films of Jane Campion. Style, vol.35, no.2, pp.193-218, Summer 2001.

[12] Ochs, E., Constructing Social Identity: A Language Socialization Perspective. Research on Language and Social Interaction, vol.26 no.3, pp.287-306, 1993.

[13] Ochs, E. Indexicality and Socialization. In R. S. J. W. Stigler, Cultural Psychology: Essays on Comparative HUman Development. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1990.

[14] Tovares, A. V., Managing the Voices: Athlete Sel-talk as a Dialogic Process. Journal of Language and Social Psychology, vol.29, no.3, pp.261-277, 2010.

[15] Thompson, K., Film Art: An Introduction. New York: McGraw-Hil, 1993.