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Heritage language for ethnic identity:  
reading Chang-rae Lee's *Native Speaker*

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**Abstract:** This study aimed to examine the connection between heritage language and ethnic identity. For this purpose, the novel *Native Speaker*, written by a Korean American author, Chang-rae Lee, was chosen as the main text. The study's relevance comes from the fact that a person's participation in the cultural activities of their ethnic groups can be determined by several variables, among which language is most strongly associated with ethnic identity. This qualitative analysis is based on Tse's ethnic identity stage, which describes how attitudes toward identity evolve. The stage begins with ambivalence toward one's ethnicity, followed by engagement with the quest for the significance of ethnic identity and, eventually, its attainment. The protagonist of the book is a second-generation Korean American man who exhibits an insecure identity. The story delineates the stage of ethnic ambivalence that arises from being cut off from one's ethnic culture and unable to integrate into the majority group. Through extensive reflection on interpersonal interactions and reconciliation with his heritage language, the main character ultimately finds an integrated identity. The results indicate that heritage language serves as a means of building ethnic identities among minorities and enhancing their sense of social integration. When their heritage languages are valued and acknowledged, minorities can forge a strong ethnic identity.

**Keywords:** Native speaker; Ethnic identity; Heritage language; Ethnic ambivalence; Immigrant

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## 1. Introduction

In a multicultural society, people with various cultural backgrounds can maintain

and practice their own traditions, lifestyles, and languages. This diversity enriches society but also causes division between central and peripheral cultures, particularly in immigrant societies. The ethnic identity of minority groups in immigrant society has emerged as a significant issue because it indicates one's sense of self as a member of both the mainstream and their own ethnic group. Ethnic identity encompasses behaviors, beliefs, values, and customs that identify a person as a member of a particular ethnic group (Shin, 2013). Language, religion, tradition, and politics are variables used to assess the extent to which individuals participate in their ethnic group's cultural practices. Among these, language has the most substantial ties to ethnic identity (Caldas and Caron-Caldas, 2002). According to Phinney, "*language is the most widely assessed cultural practice associated with ethnic identity*" (Phinney, 1990: 505).

Language is the medium by which "*standards of successful assimilation are measured*" (Eng and Han, 2000: 685). Therefore, in a multicultural society, minority groups opt to speak the dominant language with the expectation that it will facilitate their easy assimilation. On the other hand, they are encouraged to acknowledge the value of their heritage language, which will help them establish their ethnic identity and strengthen their sense of belonging to their community. Heritage language is the most frequently cited contributor to ethnic identity (Ozers, 2024; Yu, 2015). It does not belong to a dominant language in society (Rothman, 2009); it is spoken at home by immigrants and is readily accessible to children.

This study examines the relationship between heritage language and ethnic identity and finds an answer in Chang-rae Lee's novel *Native Speaker* (1995). Chang-rae Lee, a Korean American author, discusses in depth the experiences of people who are forced to relocate, whether by choice or not, and the sentiment of being an immigrant (Garner, 1999; Yang, 2024). His novel *Native Speaker* is a self-reflective narrative that portrays

Henry Park, a second-generation immigrant, as he struggles with his ethnic identity and assimilation into mainstream American society. As the novel's title implies, the novel examines immigrant society by linking language to issues of identity. In American society, Henry is conflicted about his ethnic language because his language, both English and his heritage language, is psychologically controlled. Although the novel only partially addresses the issues that arise in multicultural societies, it is determined that the connection between language and ethnic identity is significant in light of literary probabilities. Henry navigates English with a persistent sense of imperfection, viewing it as a marker of incomplete assimilation despite being a "native speaker". His childhood struggles with fluency foster self-doubt, where he perceives his speech as forever flawed, amplifying feelings of racial and cultural inadequacy. Korean, his heritage language, evokes trauma and restraint associated with familial duty, silence, and the "*chilly pitch*" of immigrant expectations, making it a source of internalized pain rather than empowerment.

How is the ambiguity of identity depicted through the lens of immigrant consciousness, and how does the power of language work to define who we are? With these queries as a backdrop, this study employs the identity-establishment stage introduced by Tse (2001) to examine Henry Park's linguistic conflict, the recovery of his heritage language, and the development of a new ethnic identity. In each stage, heritage language functions as an instrument that enables him to move forward and solidify his identity from a multicultural perspective. The findings will show how Henry establishes his hidden identity through reconciliation with his heritage language. Author Lee observed the Korean American community, identified the challenges this group faces, and ultimately presented the prospect of forming a cross-ethnic identity.

Heritage language significantly influences the formation of ethnic identity, especially in bilingual and multilingual

communities. Recent *Native Speaker* criticism often addresses language broadly (e.g., assimilation themes). Still, it rarely isolates the pathological role of heritage Koreans, as the present research does, thereby differentiating this study from both general linguistics and prior literary works by foregrounding psychological entrapment over redemptive potential. The study on heritage language in *Native Speaker* complements existing studies by bridging empirical linguistics and literary analysis, while carving out a distinct niche by focusing on psychological dysfunction rather than preservation benefits. While Smith et.al. (2021), Lee and Chang (2022), and Rivera et.al. (2023) lighten the positive roles of heritage languages in nurturing ethnic pride, cultural continuity, and community belonging among immigrants, often via quantitative data on real-world, this study spindles to a textual investigation of Korean as a mechanism of psychological control and identity conflict for Henry Park.

This approach highlights language duality's uncontrolled dimensions, such as trauma-induced silence and assimilation's alienating demands, drawn from novel-specific passages like Henry's mumbled English and familial uncommunicativeness. In the landscape of *Native Speaker* (1995), prior works seldom isolate the entrapping power of heritage Korean, as in the present study, positioning this research as a novel contribution that enriches linguistic optimism and literary criticism without contradiction. This interaction accentuates gaps in the application of empirical findings to fictional pathologies, thereby confirming this research's unique value.

These insights offer a pertinent framework for exploring the interplay between heritage language and ethnic identity in Chang-rae Lee's novel *Native Speaker* (1995). The main character, Henry Park, undergoes a significant identity crisis, primarily stemming from his distancing from the Korean language and, by extension, from his Korean cultural identity. Drawing on the

findings of the studies above, this article investigates the impact of heritage language on ethnic identity, particularly in postcolonial and diasporic contexts.

*Native Speaker* explores identity in great detail, particularly from the perspectives of linguistic and cultural assimilation. Henry Park, the protagonist, embodies the challenges of navigating two cultures: Korean and American. The novel's central concern is his internal turmoil and sense of alienation stemming from his dual identities. The immigrant experience is portrayed in *Native Speaker* as a complex and often traumatic process of self-discovery. Henry's narrative explores, in a moving way, how language, culture, and the ongoing balancing act between several worlds determine identity.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Heritage language (HL)

The HL functions as a connection, a marker, and a source of tension in the formation of identities, encompassing aspects of self-identification, perceived ethnic identity, and expressed ethnic identity (Yang, 2024). HL is also related to one's cultural environment and heritage community (Chinen and Tucker, 2005). For minority groups, the ability to communicate in their HL has significant consequences for their connection to heritage cultures. Within ethnic communities, individuals engage in cultural practices and are drawn to the values of their cultural heritage (Rosenthal and Feldman, 1992). HL is an influential factor in establishing ethnic identity; it serves as a reminder to language minority groups of their cultural heritage and unity (Hurtado and Gurin, 1987). HL proficiency encourages the transmission of ethnic values and the construction of one's identity (Hinton and Ahlers, 1999). Therefore, it is important to support the maintenance of HL. If it were not for proper educational support for HL, its speakers would gradually lose the opportunity to develop their HL literacy (Rothman, 2009). According to Fillmore (2000), failure to maintain HL causes a language barrier that

disrupts communication between parents and children and hinders the ideal parent-child relationship (Oh and Fuligni, 2000). It supports the conclusion that the use of HL fosters familial bonds and reinforces ethnic identity among adolescents (Muthuswamy, 2023).

For minorities in an immigrant society, the proficiency of HL is essential for strengthening their ethnic identity. It allows them to feel a sense of belonging to both mainstream and ethnic communities. (Imbens-Bailey, 1996; Pao et.al., 1997; Fillmore, 2000; Lee, 2002; Shin, 2013). However, maintaining HL is difficult because its value is often underestimated. It is often assumed that maintaining their heritage culture will impede their assimilation into mainstream society (Lee, 2002). In this regard, society plays an important role in helping minority groups develop the ability to speak HL and establish a bicultural identity. The success or failure of maintaining HL depends on how mainstream groups perceive the languages of ethnic minorities (Showstack et al., 2024; Shin, 2013; Brown, 2009).

The decision to preserve HL is one of many choices that the minorities make throughout their lifetime because their relationships to both minority and dominant languages are fluid. As a result, speakers of minority languages must maintain a balance between the dominant and minority languages (Fought, 2006). Regarding the balance, the dominant language of the broader speech community eventually displaces HL; hence, although HL speaking abilities persist, bilingualism is generally skewed toward the dominant language (Polinsky and Scontras, 2019).

Language in a multicultural society has the potential to become “*the most important symbol of ethnic identity*” (Fishman and Garcia, 2010: 143). Thus, it serves as an instrument for connecting an individual’s private identity with his group’s ethnic identity. HL is regarded as a factor influencing ethnic identity and solidarity within minority communities (Yu, 2015). In

other words, there are connections among heritage language proficiency, ethnic identity, and self-esteem, which may further affect children’s school performance and attitude toward future education (Portes, 2002). These tensions in HL maintenance among Korean American minorities are underexplored in *Native Speaker* scholarship, which this study addresses via Tse’s EI stages (see 2.4).

## 2.2. Ethnic identity (EI)

Identity consists of images and evaluations of self that are hierarchical, multi-dimensional, and ever-changing (Hornberger and Wang, 2008). EI indicates one’s sense of belonging to a particular ethnic group. One’s EI derives from a sense of peoplehood within a cultural setting; individuals’ actions and choices are essential to identity construction (Phinney and Ong, 2017). Phinney interprets the issue of identity in three stages: loss of EI, search for EI, and acquisition of a new identity. Tse’s (1998) four-stage model of ethnic identity development, drawn from social psychologists like Phinney (1989), outlines how racial minorities progress in their self-identification and attitudes toward heritage and majority languages: Stage 1 (Unawareness), where individuals remain oblivious to their minority status; Stage 2 (Ethnic Ambivalence/Evasion), marked by conflict and avoidance of ethnic ties; Stage 3 (Ethnic Emergence), involving active exploration and pride in heritage; and Stage 4 (Ethnic Identity Incorporation), achieving resolution and bicultural integration with positive views of both languages.

In the first stage, ethnic minorities feel alienated due to their separation from their ethnic group and a lack of mainstream acceptance. Tse (2001) refers to it as a stage of ethnic ambivalence. This stage is located along the continuum. A lack of interest in ethnic culture is on one end, and a conscious denial of ethnic heritage is on the other. Ethnic minorities exhibit a lack of enthusiasm for their own culture at this stage. They stay distant from their ethnic culture; they prefer assimilation into mainstream groups and the

use of the majority language (Tse, 2001). The second stage is characterized by the pursuit of one's own EI, which arises from significant encounters that heighten awareness of one's ethnicity. Ethnic minorities, according to Tse (2000), continue to feel uneasy about their ethnic affiliation and are unsure of how they fit into mainstream society. Ethnicity-related issues are more apparent and openly discussed at this point. Minorities re-examine their previous experiences and interactions with others. In the third stage, EI is achieved. One can possess confidence in one's own ethnicity (Phinney, 1990). This is a stage where ethnic minorities resolve their identity conflicts and feelings of alienation. They enter this stage after a long period of identity searching and negotiation (Tse, 2000). Tse's model distinguishes the present analysis from prior *Native Speaker* studies emphasizing static multiculturalism (Sari, 2021) or character arcs (Kang, 2025; see 2.4).

### 2.3. Tse's identity-stage

In the stage of ethnic ambivalence, ethnic minorities exhibit ambivalent or negative feelings toward their ethnic culture, while favoring identification with the dominant societal group. They feel uncomfortable with their ethnic association; they have yet to achieve full acceptance into the mainstream group (Tse, 1998). Ethnic minorities explore their EI in the next stage of ethnic emergence. They realize that they are uncertain about who they are and about how they will participate in society at large. In this stage, they more openly address identity issues. They develop an interest in the HL to expand their understanding of HL groups. After this awakening period, they enter the stage of ethnic incorporation, where much of the confusion and uncertainty experienced in previous stages is resolved. Ethnic minorities can establish a solid identity through self-image.

Applying this model to *Native Speaker* (1995) justifies Henry Park's arc through the stages, as his journey—from unreflective assimilation and linguistic trauma (Stage 1-2),

through spy-induced identity crises and Korean revival (Stage 3), to tentative teaching and reconciliation (Stage 4)—mirrors Tse's predicted shifts in language attitudes, uniquely tying psychological control to ethnic evolution. This framework enhances this research by providing a structured lens that is absent from purely thematic studies on *Native Speaker*.

### 2.4 Gaps in Existing Research and This Study's Contributions

Prior studies on *Native Speaker* (1995) have examined its themes of language, cultural identities, and multiculturalism. Nevertheless, they largely overlooked the dysfunctional interplay between HL and EI development through structural psychological models. For instance, Sari (2021) adopts a sociological perspective in “Language, Cultural Identities, and Multiculturalism in Chang-Rae Lee's *Native Speaker*”, analyzing how Henry Park navigates multiculturalism via language as a social marker, but focuses on broad societal integration without tracing EI progression across developmental stages or HL's psychologically disruptive role. Similarly, Kang (2025) conducts a character analysis of Henry Park in “Exploring Identity in Korean Diaspora Fiction”, emphasizing identity fragmentation in diaspora contexts through narrative elements like family and espionage. However, it remains descriptive and thematic, neglecting a stage-based framework for the language attitudes that reflect HL's specific influence on the emergence of EI ambivalence.

These works highlight multiculturalism and character-driven identity but fail to integrate social-psychological models like Tse's (1988, 2001) four-stage EI development—Unawareness, Ethnic Ambivalence/Evasion, Ethnic Emergence, and Ethnic Identity Incorporation—which this study uniquely applies to reveal HL as a source of trauma and control (e.g., stuttering, silences, mimicry) rather than mere connection. Unlike Sari's (2021) macro-sociological lens or Kang's (2025) static

character focus, this research fills these gaps by: (1) systematically mapping novel passages to Tse's stages, demonstrating HL's evolution from barrier (Stages 1-2) to integrative tool (Stages 3-4); (2) foregrounding HL dysfunctionality in immigrant minorities, contrasting positive HL maintenance narratives; and (3) providing qualitative textual evidence absent in prior comparative literary analysis. This advances the field by linking HL-EI dynamics to bicultural psychological outcomes in Korean American literature.

### 3. Research method

This study employs a qualitative textual analysis to investigate the interplay between heritage language (HL) and ethnic identity (EI) in Chang-rae Lee's *Native Speaker* (1995), drawing on Tse's (1998, 2001) four-stage model of ethnic identity development for racial minorities: (1) Stage 1 (Unawareness), characterized by lack of awareness of one's ethnic background; (2) Stage 2 (Ethnic Ambivalence/Evasion), marked by discomfort or avoidance of ethnic ties; (3) Stage 3 (Ethnic Emergence), involving active exploration and affirmation of ethnicity; and (4) Stage 4 (Ethnic Identity Incorporation), where ethnicity is stably integrated into a bicultural self. This model predicts evolving attitudes toward heritage and majority languages across stages.

Data selection followed a systematic process to ensure rigor (Maguire and Delahunt, 2017): (1) Comprehensive close reading of the entire novel to identify all passages depicting protagonist Henry Park's linguistic experiences (e.g., childhood stuttering in English, Korean familial silences, spy-related mimicry, and interactions with figures like his father, Dr. Luzan, Mr. Kwang, and Leila); (2) Alignment screening, retaining only those passages explicitly mapping to Tse's four stages (e.g., Stage 1 silences in Korean-English home life, Stage 3 emergence via political activism); (3) Representativeness check, selecting some key excerpts per stage to capture progression without redundancy;

and (4) Validation via secondary sources on Korean American literature and bilingualism for contextual fit, avoiding direct quotations to respect intellectual property. This yielded a targeted corpus of passages, prioritizing those illuminating HL's role in psychological control and EI progression.

Analysis proceeded through thematic coding and note-taking, applying Tse's four-stage framework to render selected excerpts and reveal HL's dysfunctional influence on EI, with rigor confirmed through iterative pattern identification, inter-coder reliability checks (where applicable), and cross-referencing with relational dynamics (Merriam, 2002). This qualitative approach generated interpretive insights into contextual data patterns (Merriam, 2002). The primary data source was Chang-rae Lee's *Native Speaker* (1995), published by Penguin Publishing Group, supplemented by secondary books and peer-reviewed journal articles. Data collection employed close reading and note-taking, as detailed above.

### 4. Results

Tse's (1998, 2001) four-stage model—Stage 1 (Unawareness), Stage 2 (Ethnic Ambivalence/Evasion), Stage 3 (Ethnic Emergence), and Stage 4 (Ethnic Identity Incorporation)—structures the results, tracing Henry Park's progression through linguistic experiences in *Native Speaker* (1995). Each stage highlights the HL's evolving role from a barrier to an integrative force. The concept of EI is primarily focused on an individual's outward characteristics, such as physical features and cultural expressions. Author Lee incorporates language, an internal determinant, into the discussion of ethnicity. In Lee's *Native Speaker*, language is a key factor that explains more “*about a person than the person's face or ethnicity in the sense of origin*” (Ludwig, 2007: 234). *Native Speaker* comprises the characteristics of “*adult bilingualism and biculturalism*” that address “*identity and translation, as well as movement and belonging*” (Pavlenko, 1998:3). The novel begins with a description

of Henry. His wife calls him a "stranger", "alien", and "false speaker of language" (Lee, 1995, pp. 5-6). This prelude provides important clues regarding the story's theme and development. As the story unfolds, the wife's description converges on the point where the language problem lies.

Henry Park is a quintessential Korean-American who is isolated due to his alienation from his native culture and unfulfilled desire to enter mainstream society as a true native speaker; he does not belong to either side. Through Henry's narrative of alienation and assimilation, Lee depicts the connection between HL and EI. Four personal relationships inform Henry's question of identity: his father, a psychoanalyst named Dr. Luzan, Mr. Kwang, a Korean-American politician, and Lelia, Henry's white American wife. Lelia plays a pivotal role in Henry's question of ethnic identity, serving as a linguistic and cultural mirror that exposes his alienation and catalyzes his Tse-stage progression, warranting inclusion alongside his father, Dr. Luzan, and Mr. Kwang.

#### 4.1. Ethnic ambivalence

A wide range of cultural elements, including family values, influence individual identity (Brown, 2009; Pao et al., 1997). Disappointed by his father's passivity in American society, Henry does not share his father's values. Henry believes his father is passive, not protesting his discomfort or asserting his rights. The sole right that the father wants is to be left alone, without being harmed by "corrupt city inspectors, and street criminals" (Lee, 1995: 196), so that he can run his stores. Henry disapproves of his father's submissive immigrant status and rejects the HL that connects him to his father. Consequently, it hinders the formation of his ethnic identity. Evidence indicates that the preservation of parental cultural practices is positively associated with both ethnic and national identity, which, in turn, is associated with adolescents' well-being (Sari et al., 2018).

Henry's father speaks simple English when he tries to cover up his lies, whereas Henry deliberately speaks English when he tries to defy his father. This language barrier causes Henry to feel conflicting identities. Henry's father views America through the eyes of working-class immigrants. Still, unlike him, Henry seeks his assimilation with the naive hope that the white majority will view him as an equal member. Henry's repeated self-identification as an "assimilist" (Lee, 1995:160; 267) reveals his frustration as an outsider to mainstream society. Henry rejects heritage culture in order to assimilate into the mainstream fully, but ends up belonging to neither side.

His father has observed that his chosen nation follows a set of procedures, "certain rules of engagement," and did not want Henry to become an anxious boy (Lee, 1995, pp. 47-48). Knowing that "in America, it is hard to stay Korean" (Lee, 1995: 51), he wanted Henry to have a solid command of English and to live like an actual American. He did not actively try to teach Henry Korean. The father asked young Henry, who was assisting at the store, to try "some Shakespeare words" in front of the white guests (Lee, 1995: 53). For him, Henry was his pride, who could fill in his linguistic gaps. Per his father's guidance and hope, Henry devotes considerable time to various "flesh of math" (Lee, 1995: 157) to survive and succeed as a minority. However, his efforts actually led to a division of identity.

Henry recalls that his family was careful about what others thought of them. His father never felt comfortable in his neighborhood. The only time his father came out was when Henry was playing basketball in the gym, where he remained invisible by "never shouting or urging like the other fathers and others did" (Lee, 1995: 52). Henry finds it challenging to communicate with society, his parents, his wife, and his son because he is in a situation where neither his American nor his Korean identity can be his core identity. As a result, he isolates himself. His wife refers to him as "a stranger, follower, and traitor"

(Lee, 1995: 18). According to Tse (2000), alienation is a typical manifestation of ethnic ambivalence.

Henry was naturally exposed to Korean at home and grew up believing that Korean was his only language. When he started his schooling, Henry had his first experience of two languages colliding in his head and realized he was a mixed-language user. He initially believed that English would be a different version of Korean, like another type of coat, but he soon realized that his tongue would tie during his first few attempts, “*like an animal booby-trapped*” (Lee, 1995: 233). He recalls the embarrassment of being referred to as “*marble mouth*” in kindergarten because of his muddled speech. He said “*riddle for little, or bent for vent*” (Lee, 1995: 234).

The experience at the Remedial Speech supplementary class led Henry to believe that he would “*always make bad errors of speech*” (Lee, 1995: 234). He thought that he and the other children were sent there because they “*were misfits*” or could not speak English well (Lee, 1995: 234), under the guise of “*institutional frustration or goodwill*” (Lee, 1995: 235). He was unable to compete with average white boys because they had the English language, which acts as a shield for them. There is “*no fair way for us to fight,*” he thought (Lee, 1995: 244). Henry wanted his son Mitt to live in a monoethnic, single-language community that would give him authority and confidence, which “*his broad half-yellow face could not*” (Lee, 1995: 267). Henry’s wife, Lelia, a language therapist for immigrant children, insisted on sending her son to a Korean school on weekends. However, Henry does not choose to teach his son Korean, which he once presumed “*useless*” (Lee, 1995: 285).

According to Phinney (1990), individuals in this stage are unsure of their identity. Individual identities of ethnic minorities are shaped by how others perceive them (Brown, 2009). Henry chooses to keep his identity confidential. When trouble hits, he locks up and keeps silent. He visualizes

himself coming “*by the midnight coach*” (Lee, 1995: 160) out of sight of others. He lives like an invisible man who knows the “*moment of disappearance*” (Lee, 1995: 202).

In this context, Henry’s work as a secret agent is the right job for him because he can hide his identity from the eyes of others. Henry feels that he has found his “*truest place in the culture*” (Lee, 1995: 127). Under the mask of a spy, he could be anyone, “*perhaps several anyones at once*” (Lee, 1995: 127), but he could not be himself. He is “*every version of the newcomer*” who is always fearful, bitter, and sad (Lee, 1995: 160). Given this limitation in his ability to express himself verbally and professionally, Henry creates an imaginary older brother who has everything he wants. He is a man well-versed in science, sports, and American history. He is a man who can “*make public speeches*” with his beautiful English. Henry states that his brother is the most perfect human being, a source of pride for his parents (Lee, 1995: 205).

#### 4.2. Ethnic emergence

This stage arises from significant experiences that motivate ethnic minorities to recognize their ethnicity (Phinney, 1990; Tse, 2000). Henry, posing as a patient, approaches the psychoanalyst, Dr. Luzan, to obtain information about the Philippine politician. However, as the conversation progresses, Henry reveals his desire to be honest and show his true self. Sitting before Luzan, he lost himself completely, “*becoming dangerously frank, inconsistently schizophrenic*” (Lee, 1995: 22). Luzan questions, “*Who are you? Whom have you been all your life?*” (Lee, 1995: 205); the questions stimulate Henry to find a way to re-establish his connection to his EI.

To settle his ethnic ambivalence, Henry needs to recover the language that would help him express himself. With his professional intuition, Dr. Luzan recognizes that Henry’s problem stems from issues related to his origins, relationships, and confidence; he encourages Henry to express himself in his



own words without hiding his identity. The meeting with Dr. Luzan is significant in Henry's life because it marks the beginning of his effort to recognize his true self. Henry later says that Dr. Luzan saved his life in ways "*he never imagined, or ever could*" (Lee, 1995: 207).

Henry's identity is tested when he is assigned to a campaign office as a volunteer intern. His mission is to monitor John Kwang, an ambitious Korean-American politician working his way toward becoming the first Asian American mayor of New York City. Henry reckons that Kwang has successfully acculturated to the mainstream without losing his heritage culture. The minority voices in Kwang's campaign reminded him of his father, who struggled to survive a life of discrimination and marginalization. Brown (2009) argues that minorities build their identities on the solid foundation of their heritage. In this regard, Henry's memory of his father is the beginning of the restoration of his native language. The sense of intimacy grows between Kwang and Henry as they speak in little Korean, and Henry develops a sense of belonging to his own EI, which he had previously rejected. He expresses his desire to be like him: "*his identity, which may also be mine*" (Lee, 1995: 328). To Henry's eyes, Kwang has the "*big brother*" image he created.

While reading the list of immigrants who donated money to Kwang, Henry could visualize their children, jobs, finances, and lives because their story resembled his. At the same time, he realizes that he has lost his "*old mother tongue*" (Lee, 1995: 279). When Henry was young, his parents hired a Korean woman as a helper. She spoke no English, so Henry rarely spoke to her. He did not even know her name. He now regrets having no recollection of his conversation with her: "*If I had the sentence, the right words, I would ask her about her family*" (Lee, 1995: 316).

In Kwang's election office, Henry sees the possibility of two ethnic identities coexisting. He gradually approaches his native language, which is the source of his

hidden identity. When he steps into Korean stores, he feels compelled to speak the language because he knows every pitch and note but "*can no longer call them forth*" (Lee, 1995: 267). When Kwang is in despair after the bombing of his office and the death of his bodyguard, Henry tries to give him words of comfort. He feels an attachment to his long-forgotten HL that he could share with Kwang. He wishes to speak with Kwang in Korean, which is the language "*by which real secrets may be courted, unveiled*" (Lee, 1995: 275), because English does not touch what he wants to say. Kwang allows Henry to yell at him and strike out at him, either in English or Korean, to get the burden out in the open: "*Say it in English if you have to. Get it out in the open*" (Lee, 1995: 300).

When Kwang's political initiative fails before the defense line established by the mainstream, Henry learns that his desire for assimilation is meaningless. His rejection of his father's language seems to be waning. He remembers his father's struggle to adjust to a new environment while speaking simple English. Since what Henry has accomplished in his life is so different from what his father could only have imagined, he belatedly expresses awe and pity for his father's life and begs for his forgiveness: "*If he would forgive me now*" (Lee, 1995: 266). Inspired by his relationship with Kwang, Henry is motivated to connect with both his roots and his current society. Reunion with his father's language provides him with the rationale to adopt the identity of a Korean American of his own choosing.

#### 4.3. Ethnic incorporation

Language conveys one's identity just as much as a name does. After the collapse of John Kwang, Henry leaves his undercover position, which he has maintained under a false name, and works as an assistant in his wife's English class, where he helps minority children adjust to American society without losing their identity. According to Fought (2006), it is critical to maintain the balance in the use of dominant and minority languages.

Shin (2013) asserts that collaboration among mainstream groups will promote the survival of the minority language. Lelia encourages immigrant children to express themselves in their own English, no matter how imperfect it may be. She appreciates every feature they have and expresses compassion for kids learning unfamiliar English: "*This must be the special language*" (Lee, 1995: 340).

The kids learn from Lelia that "*there is nothing to fear, and it is fine to mess it all up*" (Lee, 1995: 349). Lelia, being aware of the harmonious development of both languages, shows respect for EI(s). To give kids a feeling of "*who we are*", Lelia calls children's foreign names "*taking care of every last pitch and accent*" (Lee, 1995: 349). While helping children, Henry not only misses his father's simple English but also misses Korean, which he formerly thought was "*useless, never uttered, and never lived*" (Lee, 1995: 285). He is determined to do virtually anything to hear his father speak once more: "*I will listen for him forever in the streets of this city*" (Lee, 1995: 337). Reuniting with his father's language, he voluntarily establishes a new identity as a Korean American, rather than under pressure.

#### 4.4 Ethnic identity incorporation

In Tse's (2001) Stage 4, ethnic minorities achieve stable incorporation of ethnicity into a bicultural self, viewing both heritage and majority languages positively without conflict. Henry reaches this resolution after Kwang's collapse, shedding his spy identity ("*false name*") to assist Lelia's classes for immigrant children, embracing HL as a bridge rather than as "*useless*" (Lee, 1995: 285). He now values his father's "simple English" and Korean silences, vowing to "listen for him forever in the streets of the city" (Lee, 1995: 337). Signaling reconciled familial bonds and the reclamation of HL.

Lelia's therapy mirrors Henry's growth: she honors children's "foreign names" with "every last pitch and accent" (Lee, 1995: 349), teaching that imperfect

bilingualism fosters "who we are" without fear (Lee, 1995: 349). Henry internalizes this, rejecting his prior wish for Mitt's monolingual English (Lee, 1995: 267) and affirming biculturalism. HL no longer evokes trauma (e.g., "*marble mouth*" stuttering, Lee, 1995: 234) but empowers identity, as he helps children "*adjust to American society without losing their identity*". Unlike earlier instances of evasion, Henry now voluntarily integrates Korean-American duality, confirming Tse's prediction of positive language attitudes in Stage 4 (Tse, 1998). Henry's arc validates Tse's model, uniquely revealing HL's dysfunctional-to-integrative shift in Korean-American literature, from alienation (Stages 1-2) to emergence and incorporation (Stages 3-4).

#### 5. Discussion

While the first generation of immigrants came to the United States by their own choice, the second generation is born as US citizens regardless of their choice. They regard themselves as American citizens and want to share the culture of mainstream society. Still, in the process of assimilation, they are marginalized and undergo a period of ethnic ambivalence. Being placed in a situation of complex identity, they engage more actively in identity quests than the first generation. Henry's process of identity searching is accompanied by Dr. Luzan, Lelia, and John Kwang. Spying on a psychiatrist, Dr. Luzan, Henry senses a change in himself. Henry begins to tell his real story when his made-up story runs out, and he finally comes face-to-face with his inner self. Dr. Luzan is the first to recognize Henry's ambiguous identity and helps him speak on his own terms without hiding. Therefore, Henry expresses his appreciation for his help. Working with John Kwang is a meaningful opportunity for Henry.

Through observing Kwang's rise and fall, Henry experiences an expansion of his consciousness toward his heritage. Kwang presents a fresh image of an immigrant who can adapt to different cultures and linguistic

systems. He motivates Henry to discover his roots. Henry has the chance to learn the importance of heritage languages in Lelia's class. Henry can reclaim his heritage language and his hidden identity. Without drawing a border, he enters mainstream society and redefines himself as a citizen who carries the EI(s) of both nations.

HL in *Native Speaker* (1995) is a potent indicator of EI, embodying the intricate relationship between assimilation pressures and cultural heritage. It emphasizes the significant influence of language on identity development by reshaping the protagonist's relationships, inner conflicts, and overall sense of self. In *Native Speaker*, ancestral language is a key factor in shaping EI, highlighting the close ties to one's cultural origins and the difficulties of integration.

Henry feels connected to his cultural heritage and his family history since he speaks Korean. As a link to his parents' immigration experiences and to the broader Korean American community, this linguistic tie is an essential component of his identity. Cultural quirks, customs, and beliefs that are fundamental to his sense of self are conveyed through language. The novel emphasizes the dual powers of language, isolation, and connection. Although Henry's proficiency in both Korean and English helps him navigate various cultural situations, it may also lead to misunderstandings and miscommunication. The greater identity crisis that many immigrants experience is reflected in their reluctance to express themselves in either language completely.

The expectations and pressures Henry faced from his parents and the Korean community are reflected in his ancestral language. Henry's wish to assimilate into American culture frequently conflicts with his father's emphasis on upholding Korean customs and values. Henry experiences internal turmoil and is shaped by linguistic and cultural pressures to remain faithful to his origins. One topic that keeps coming up is the conflict between sticking to his indigenous tongue and fitting in with American society.

Henry's ability to communicate well in English is crucial to his career and social integration, but it also sets him apart from his Korean background. This language gap exacerbates his sense of isolation and incompleteness inside both cultures.

Henry's relationships are impacted by HL, especially his marriage to Lelia. Henry's identity crisis is linked to Lelia's discomfort with his emotional detachment and his difficulties in having honest conversations. Henry and his father's linguistic barrier also represents the broader generational and cultural divide that they are unable to overcome. The use of the HL symbolizes Henry's identity issue. His dual fluency is a metaphor for the duality of his existence, as he is torn between two realities and never quite belongs in either. This dichotomy shapes his quest for self-discovery and serves as both a source of strength and a source of conflict.

Henry Park's experiences in *Native Speaker* resonate with the concepts articulated by Showstack et al. (2024) concerning the complex interplay between HL, identity, and societal influences within bilingual communities. Showstack et al. (2024) contend that HL is vital for preserving EI; however, its survival is frequently undermined by prevailing language ideologies that favor the majority language over minority or HL(s). In Henry's case, his estrangement from the Korean language exemplifies the identity fragmentation identified by Showstack et al. (2024) in which the erosion of HL results in feelings of cultural dislocation and alienation.

Henry's linguistic alienation mirrors the broader societal pressures of assimilation emphasized by Showstack et al. (2024), particularly the expectation to adapt to the dominant English-speaking culture in the United States. His internal struggle reflects the challenges faced by many HL learners who must balance societal demands with their personal identities. As Henry becomes increasingly proficient in English and embraces an Americanized identity, he experiences a deepening disconnect from his

Korean heritage and family, highlighting how language loss can disrupt the intergenerational transfer of cultural values. In this regard, Henry's narrative serves as a literary embodiment of Showstack et al.'s (2024) conclusions, illustrating how linguistic and cultural assimilation can lead to identity dissonance and diminished connection to one's ethnic roots.

*Native Speaker* (1995) is a bildungsroman. Henry experiences identity confusion because he is not a native speaker. Still, through the memory of his father, consultation with Dr. Luzan, and work with the immigrant politician John Kwang, he gradually matures as an immigrant, broadening his perspectives and gaining the opportunity to become a faithful member of American society. The scene of Lelia and Henry's language class, which concludes the work, symbolically reflects the author's ongoing exploration of immigrant identity.

The connection between HL and EI, as explored in the aforementioned studies, is strikingly reflected in the character of Henry Park in Lee's *Native Speaker*. Henry's challenges with language, identity, and a sense of belonging resonate with the broader societal dynamics prevalent in bilingual communities. This research highlights the significance of HL as a cultural foundation that bolsters EI. Nevertheless, Henry's disconnection from his Korean HL illustrates the identity dissonance that can arise when one lacks a strong connection to their HL. His limited proficiency in Korean serves as a metaphor for his fragmented identity, as he navigates the space between his Korean roots and his American social environment. Henry's father's emphasis on assimilation over cultural preservation exemplifies the potential repercussions of inadequate intergenerational language transmission. While studies indicate that maintaining HL fortifies EI, Henry's father prioritizes adaptation to American society, thereby exacerbating Henry's internal identity conflict.

Henry Park's arc in *Native Speaker* (1995) validates Tse's (1998, 2001)

four-stage ethnic identity (EI) model—Unawareness (Stage 1), Ethnic Ambivalence/Evasion (Stage 2), Ethnic Emergence (Stage 3), and Ethnic Identity Incorporation (Stage 4)—while revealing heritage language (HL)'s dysfunctional role, distinguishing this study from prior sociological (Sari, 2021) or character-focused (Kang, 2025) analyses (see Section 2.4). As has been approved in the previous analysis, dealing with Tse's Stages 1-2: Unawareness and Ambivalence, early linguistic traumas (e.g., stuttering, familial silences; Lee, 1995, pp. 233-234) trap Henry in unawareness and ambivalence, rejecting HL for assimilation yet achieving neither belonging (Section 4.1). This echoes Tse's (2001) predictions of negative HL attitudes but extends Showstack et al. (2024) by conceptualizing HL as psychological control rather than merely a preservation tool, thereby exacerbating generational divides (e.g., father-son English barrier).

Related to Stage 3: Ethnic Emergence, Dr. Luzan and Kwang catalyze emergence (Section 4.2), prompting Korean reclamation amid political failure (Lee, 1995, pp. 275, 328). Unlike positive HL narratives (Fillmore, 2000), Henry's pivot highlights HL's delayed utility post-crisis, thereby filling gaps in *Native Speaker* scholarship by mapping Tse's exploration phase to the resolution of bilingual trauma. In Stage 4: Ethnic Identity Incorporation, Henry achieves bicultural stability by assisting Lelia's classes (Section 4.4; Lee, 1995, pp. 337, 349), valuing "*simple English*" and Korean without conflict—confirming Tse's (1998) positive views on dual language. This contrasts with Sari (2021), which focuses on multiculturalism and foregrounds HL's shift from barrier to empowerment in the Korean-American bildungsroman.

The discussion above has generated new synthesis and contributions. Tse's model structures the HL-EI interplay, with dysfunctionality (e.g., spy mimicry as an evasion strategy) evolving into integration, resonating with Phinney (1990) and

Showstack et al. (2024) on assimilation pressures. Unlike existing works, this qualitative textual mapping, guided by Tse's stages, advances Korean diaspora literature by evidencing HL's traumatic-to-integrative trajectory and informing HL maintenance policies for second-generation immigrants.

## 6. Conclusion

This study emerges within a postcolonial context, resonating with theorists such as Bhabha (1994) on hybridity and Fanon (1967) on linguistic alienation, in which HL dysfunctionality in *Native Speaker* (1995) symbolizes resistance to Anglocentric assimilation and the reclaiming of Korean as a decolonial tool across Tse's stages. Unlike Eurocentric identity models, it illuminates second-generation immigrants' "third space" (Bhabha, 1994), evolving from colonial mimicry (spy role, Stage 2) to bicultural agency (Stage 4 teaching), filling postcolonial gaps in Korean diaspora literature overlooked by sociological (Sari, 2021) or character analysis (Kang, 2025). These insights advocate HL policies that counter neocolonial language ideologies (Showstack et al., 2024) and advance global postcolonial scholarship on minority bilingualism.

This study employs Tse's (1998, 2001) complete four-stage model---Stage 1 (Unawareness), Stage 2 (Ethnic Ambivalence/Evasion), Stage 3 (Ethnic Emergence), and Stage 4 (Ethnic Identity Incorporation) - to trace heritage language (HL)'s dysfunctional-to-integrative role in protagonist Henry Park's EI development in Chang-rae Lee's *Native Speaker* (1995). Through systematic textual analysis (Section 3), HL evolves from barrier (e.g., stuttering trauma, familial silences; Stage 1-2, Section 4.1) to catalyst (Korean reclamation via Dr. Luzan/Kwang; Stage 3, Section 4.2) and empowerment (bicultural teaching with Lelia; Stage 4, Section 4.4), filling gaps in prior *Native Speaker* scholarship (Sari, 2021; Kang, 2025; Section 2.4).

In *Native Speaker*, Lee presents language as the determinant of ethnicity. The

disinterest in the HL places Henry in a state of ethnic ambivalence, in which he finds himself belonging to neither community. His attempt to identify his EI begins with the recovery of his HL, which connects him to his origins. In the process of identity search, HL functions as an instrument that helps a minority individual identify clues to establishing their identity from multicultural perspectives. This study contributes to the ongoing discussion of bilingualism, identity formation, and the broader implications of language ideologies in multicultural settings. It is concluded that minority individuals can develop a strong EI and strengthen their sense of belonging to the community when their HL(s) are recognized and respected.

These findings echo in a postcolonial context, embodying Bhabha's (1994) hybrid "third space" and Fanon's (1967) linguistic alienation, in which Henry's spy mimicry resists Anglocentric hierarchies and reclaims Korean as a site of decolonial agency. Unlike positive HL narratives, this reveals the psychological toll of dysfunctionality on second-generation immigrants, advancing Korean diaspora literature and bilingualism discourse (Showstack et al., 2024). Recognizing HL supports EI stability and bicultural belonging, informing policies against assimilation pressures. Future research could quantify the links between HL-EI across diaspora texts.

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