

***A Chinese walks into a bar...: English Ethnonym Ideologies**

The use of English ethnonyms (e.g., ‘Chinese,’ ‘German,’ ‘Turk,’ or ‘Iraqi’) reflects a complex interplay between word category, inflectional status, and both grammatical and social acceptability. In particular, some ethnonyms can be used in the singular form (a German walks into a bar...), while others are judged unacceptable. In this talk, we set out to determine if speakers’ ethnonym use reflects ideologies about politeness when referring to ethnic groups, and how this social acceptability interacts with the number category, and the grammatical acceptability of a particular ethnonym. The analysis further explores variation in judgements according to the respondents’ age (increased acceptability among speakers born in the 1940s and 1950s), ethnicity, and nationality.

The data is based on speakers’ metalinguistic judgements about ethnonym use as given in an extensive web-based questionnaire completed by 208 English speakers world-wide. The questionnaire was composed of 100+ simple sentences employing 8 ethnonyms in varying word categories, inflection types, and number groups. Independent analyses were conducted based on responses to four questions for each sentence: whether the sentence sounded impolite, old fashioned, grammatical, and like the respondent’s own dialect.

In terms of word category, some ethnonyms are inherently nominal (Turk, Finn), others are only adjectival (French, English), and still others are deadjectival in a nominal function (German, Iraqi, Chinese). Within this class of deadjectival nominals we can identify two phonologically based subclasses: those that end in a final sibilant (Chinese, Portuguese, Swiss), and those that do not (German, American, Iraqi). While the *Turk* and the *German* types are equally grammatical in the singular and the plural (a Turk, a German vs. three Turks, three Germans), the *Chinese* type, for many speakers, is only marginally grammatical (*a Chinese, *a Swiss). Interestingly, the sibilant-final forms become increasingly acceptable as the number increases (?many Chinese, ?thousands of Chinese; $p \leq 0.001$).

Cross-cutting the dimension of grammatical acceptability is that of social acceptability. While the singular use of underived nominal ethnonyms for many speakers carries connotations of impoliteness, the singular use of deadjectival nominal forms usually does not (?I saw a Turk/Finn vs. I saw an Iraqi/Russian). Building on Wierzbicka (1986), we propose that underived nominal forms of ethnonyms may be interpreted as impolite because those forms delimit the referent categorically on the basis of their ethnicity. Deadjectival forms, by contrast, do not, and thus remain neutral in their social usage.

Interestingly, like the underived nominal forms, some speakers also judge the bare, sibilant-final deadjectival forms (a Chinese, a Portuguese) to be impolite. We posit that the basic unacceptability of the singular of this ethnonym subclass has a morphophonological source; the final sibilant, homophonous with the English plural marker, blocks a singular reading. We further suggest that this source of ungrammaticality is opaque speakers who reinterpret that unacceptability as a social constraint, associating the singular use with the impoliteness that is identified with underived nominal forms. We argue that English ethnonym use presents a challenge to linguistic analyses in general, since their use can best be understood with intertwined reference to morphophonology, morphosyntax, lexical semantics, and social ideologies.

Reference

Wierzbicka, A. 1986. What’s in a noun? (or: How do nouns differ in meaning from adjectives?). *Studies in Language*. 10:353–389.