

Vernacular Features in the English of NYC's American-Born Chinese

Research on the speech of American-born Chinese (ABCs) has generally focused on the relationship between the heritage language and American English in code-switching and language shift/maintenance situations (Chiang, 2001; Li, 1982; Lin, 2000; Williams, 2005). Few studies have characterized the phonetic features of English employed by ABCs in the variationist tradition. This study looks at second generation Chinese Americans in New York City who speak English natively and seeks to provide a quantitative profile of their English.

In his 1963 study, Labov justifiably excluded the 3% Chinese population of the Lower East Side because they were non-native English speakers. However, the number of Chinese Americans who speak English natively has grown over the last 40 years since the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act (García, 1997). In addition to speaking English natively, ABCs growing up in NYC are exposed not only to the more “general” variety of American English but also to the local vernacular—New York City English (NYCE). Studying the English of NYC's ABCs offers a unique opportunity: 1) to explore how speakers' social and ethnic affiliations interact with competing dialect norms and 2) to re-examine the ownership of NYCE, which Labov (1966) implicitly attributed primarily to NYC's Italian and Jewish Americans.

The data come from sociolinguistic interviews conducted with female ABCs, aged 18-30, all born, raised and still living in one of NYC's five boroughs. Informants also read a passage and wordlists, providing more formal styles. Social network data were obtained through a name-elicitation questionnaire. A set of ethnicity questionnaires adopted from Tsai et al. (2000) measured informants' ethnic and cultural orientation relative to lifestyles. Adherence to NYCE norms is quantified by comparing informants' rates of use of vernacular features with those documented by Labov (1966), including the *cot/caught* distinction, short-*a* tensing, post-vocalic-*r*, and realization of interdental fricatives. The rates of use of these features are then correlated with differences in informants' social network affiliations (i.e. strong Chinese ties vs. strong non-Chinese ties) and lifestyles (i.e. more Chinese-oriented lifestyles vs. more American-oriented lifestyles).

Preliminary data analyses show that informants do not employ all four NYCE features to the same extent as documented by Labov (1966). For example, more informants retain the *cot/caught* distinction than remain *r*-less, corresponding to previous observations that NYCE is undergoing a widescale shift to *r*-fulness while continuing to resist the *cot/caught* merger (Labov, 1966 & 1994; Fowler, 1986; Becker et al., 2005). Moreover, few informants use tensed short-*a*. Differences in ethnic and cultural orientation in lifestyles obtained from the ethnicity questionnaires do not appear to correlate with the rates of use of vernacular features. However, social network data suggest a trend that a high proportion of Chinese ties in informants' networks inhibits accommodation to local NYCE norms and a high proportion of non-Chinese ties promotes the use of NYCE features. This trend observed in second generation Chinese Americans parallels Kirke's (2004) study of Irish immigrants in NYC: personal networks with strong intra-ethnic ties inhibit accommodation to the host society's vernacular norms.

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