

“As Ethnic As We Want to Be”: Toward a Quantification of Ethnicity and Language Variation

Although ethnicity has been a central preoccupation of variationist sociolinguistics since its inception (Labov 1963), definitions of ethnic identity have been notoriously problematic, usually relying on lineal descent (cf. Walker 2001). In this paper, we address the nature of ethnic identity as a social category in variationist research, drawing on methodological approaches used in social psychology (cf. Edwards & Chisholm 1987; Keefe & Padilla 1987; Kalin & Berry 1994). We make use of an ethnic orientation questionnaire as part of the sociolinguistic interview to measure speakers' perceptions of ethnic identity. Quantifying responses to the questionnaire, we assign each speaker an ethnic orientation (EO) index score.

The specific focus of our research is the city of Toronto, which features a high degree of contact among speakers of different minority languages in an English-dominant context. Members of different ethnic groups have tended to settle in particular neighbourhoods, leading to the development of “ethnic enclaves” in which it is possible to function almost entirely in the minority language among people of the same ethnic background. Such enclaves may result in “ethnolects” (Carlock and Wölck 1981) which, it is predicted, will eventually alter the nature of Canadian English. In the first phase of a largescale systematic attempt to address the effects of language contact in Toronto, we interviewed 80 residents of Toronto of Italian, Chinese and British descent, stratified according to generation and enclave status.

Analysis of EO index scores reveals stark contrasts between Italian and Chinese speakers. Chinese EO indices are higher (.60) than Italians (.47), differences which are maintained across generations. Furthermore, the range of scores among Italians (.16-.76) is higher than that among the Chinese (.33-.83), differences which persist when speakers are grouped according to both ethnicity and generation. Thus, it appears that within the more established ethnic community (Italian), speakers have a greater range of ethnic orientations. These results are reflected in linguistic analyses of two variables ((t/d)-deletion, the Canadian Vowel Shift), in which Chinese speakers pattern the least like the British control group and second-generation enclave Italians mark their orientation toward their ethnic-enclave status via elevated use of one pattern of the vowel shift.

These results suggest that the EO index not only offers a more nuanced method of gauging ethnic identity, but is also useful for comparing results across and within ethnic groups.