

ABSTRACT

YOU HAVE TO LEARN TO ADAPT: A SOCIOLINGUISTIC STUDY OF CHINESE AMERICANS IN THE "ASIAN CITY" OF SOUTHEAST MICHIGAN

By

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This dissertation explores the nature of dialect contact, ethnic identity construction by examining the extent to which the speech of second generation Chinese Americans, born and raised in Troy, Michigan, is affected by two local sound changes: the Northern Cities Shift (NCS), the dominant dialect among mainstream Michiganders of European American descent (Labov, Ash & Boberg 2006); and an emerging sound change in Michigan, the Elsewhere Shift (Kendall & Fridland, 2014).

The community investigated in this dissertation, Troy, is in southeast Michigan. It is distinguished by its large population of Chinese Americans and a long residence history of Chinese immigrants compared to other Asian groups (Metzger and Booza 2001). Referred to locally as “the Asian city of southeast Michigan”, 19% of Troy residents are Asian and 5% self-identify as being of Chinese descent. Job opportunities in the auto industry, a high-quality education system, and a safe environment have been attracting an increasing number of Chinese immigrants to this area from the 1960s and continuing to the present day.

The acoustic and statistical analysis was carried out on the vowel system of 30 college-age Chinese American speakers, and 15 comparable European Americans serve as a reference group. Data collection was conducted by two interviewers: a male graduate student from China, and a European American undergraduate female student who was also from southeast Michigan. The data in this study were collected by a structured interview similar to a sociolinguistic interview.

The analyses show that Troy Chinese Americans are participating in the local vowel system to the same degree as their European American cohort. Nonetheless, even though the two ethnic groups share similar social evaluation of those vowels, as indicated by the examination of contextual style-shifting, inter-ethnic differences were nonetheless found for vowels such as THOUGHT, DRESS, STRUT, TRAP and TOO. Inter-ethnic variation in the realization of TOO was found to be an interlocutor effect. I argue that the F2 dimension of TOO is used by Chinese Americans as a way to index ethnic identity, solidarity, and localness in Troy, Michigan.

This study draws on research in variationist sociolinguistics. It joins a growing body of work within variationist sociolinguistics that investigates Asian American speakers in the U.S. (e.g., Hall-Lew 2009, Wong 2015, Bauman 2016). The purpose of this work is to contribute to our knowledge of the complex interactions between language, ethnicity identity and regional identity construction. In the variationist literature, there are a limited number of studies focusing on stylistic variation that signals response to interlocutor ethnicity (e.g., Rickford and McNair-Knox 1994 for African American English). This study serves as the first step towards investigating the stylistic variation of CAs' English – grounded in the variationist approach to ethnic minority English in the U.S. – and to enrich our understanding of intra-speaker and inter-speaker stylistic variation.