

Chinese American accommodation to the Northern Cities Shift in Southeast Michigan

Most dialectological and sociolinguistic work on US populations has been of European-Americans (e.g. Labov 1972, 2001); African-Americans (e.g. Wolfram, Thomas 1997, 2002); and (more recently) Mexican-Americans (e.g. Roeder 2006, Ocumpaugh 2010). Asian Americans have not been much studied by sociolinguists (Fought 2004, Wolfram and Schilling-Estes 2006). The few variationist studies that exist on Asian Americans have been of Chinese Americans on the East and West coasts (e.g. Hall-Lew 2009, Wong 2007, 2010), not in the Midwest.

The current research addresses this gap and aims to explore the nature of dialect contact by examining the extent to which the speech of Chinese Americans in Troy, Michigan is affected by an ongoing local change, the Northern Cities Shift (NCS). This study also examines the extent to which any difference in accommodation to the NCS correlates with speakers' social networks and cultural orientation.

The data of the study come from 8 college students who are 2nd generation Chinese Americans (4 male & 4 female) from Troy, Michigan, who are currently studying at a large Midwestern university. 9503 tokens were extracted from recordings of a wordlist, a reading passage and an interview (Forced Alignment & Vowel Extraction (FAVE), Rosenfelder, et al. 2011). The normalized formant data extracted by FAVE were plotted in R (R Core Team 2014). Labov's (2007) five criteria were then used to quantify speakers' degree of participation in the NCS. Participants' social networks data were gathered through a name-elicitation questionnaire adapted from Kirke (2005). The higher the social network index score is, the denser non-Chinese social network the speaker has. An adapted questionnaire based on Tsai, Ying & Lee (2000) was used to investigate participants' cultural identity. The higher the score a speaker gets, the stronger the orientation to Chinese culture the speaker has. The speakers' degree of accommodation in the NCS was then examined to see whether it corresponded with speakers' social network and cultural orientation.

Participants in this study did not show clear evidence of accommodation to the NCS in Troy, Michigan as a whole. For the analysis of all the speakers, none of the criteria were satisfied except that /æ/ is fronter, but not higher than /e/. When looking at individual speakers, the one with the most non-Chinese contact (index score=11) and the least Chinese oriented cultural identity (score=78) exhibited the highest NCS score (satisfied 3 NCS criteria) among the 8 speakers. None of the rest of the speakers, who had lower range of social network index score (0 to 0.71) and higher cultural identity score (87 to 96), got a NCS score above 2.

These results observed in 2nd generation Chinese Americans from Troy, Michigan showed limited accommodation to the NCS. In addition, cultural identity and social network are influential factors. This finding was in line with previous studies about various ethnicities' participation in regional dialect change in different areas of the US (Evans 2001, Kirke 2005, Wong 2007), while contradicts Hall-Lew (2009).

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