

Ethnicity and morphosyntactic variation: Indexing identity in San Francisco Chinatown

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Ethnicity is one of the key social variables influencing linguistic variation. In traditional sociolinguistic studies (e.g. Labov 1972), ethnicity has been conceptualised as fixed and stable with linguistic variation indexing allegiance to either the heritage or the mainstream community. As “such dichotomization risks oversimplifying the multivalent and multimodal nature of identities as well as the nuanced ways in which these identities are indexed and negotiated linguistically” (Wong & Hall-Lew 2014: 27), more recent studies (Hall-Lew 2009, 2010; Nagy et al. 2014; Noels 2014) conceptualise ethnicity as complex and layered and show that “people’s definition of their own ethnicity may even change in different situations” (Bell 2002: 164).

In the present study, the role of ethnic orientation and morphosyntactic variation is investigated in English-speaking first- and second-generation Chinese Americans with strong ties to the ethnic enclave of San Francisco Chinatown. Ethnic identity and sense of belonging are analysed by quantifying semi-structured interview data, an approach that yields specific cluster groups based on participants’ own perception of their ethnic identity. Applying such a participant-centred approach, then, allows for a more fine-grained evaluation of ethnic orientation (c.f. Hoffman & Walker 2010 and Nagy et al. 2014 for a similar approach). The effect of membership in a specific cluster group on linguistic variation is then tested on a set of three morphosyntactic variables: tense marking, number marking, and article variation.

Results of statistical testing, using a generalised linear mixed model, show some correlation of morphosyntactic features with social variables, especially in the second-generation. However, non-standard feature use is more strongly influenced by traditional dialectological variables like age and gender than ethnic identity, and effects of sociohistorical developments as well as cover prestige seem to be at play when linguistic variation can be observed.