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Do I Sound "Asian" to You?: Linguistic Markers of Asian American Identity

David B. Hanna
University of Pennsylvania, dhanna@ling.upenn.edu

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1. Background

A popular topic among young Asian Americans[1] is whether certain members of the group sound "Asian" or not, suggesting that there may be perceptible differences in their English speech. This group, which is the fastest growing minority in the United States today, is heterogeneous in that its members comprise several different ethnic groups, each with different cultures and traditions. More importantly, their parents' languages originate from a host of different language families. Yet they also share common experiences, such as growing up in a bicultural world and facing the same types of prejudices. While assimilation into the majority white American culture has become the dominant pattern, these experiences have also caused many Asian Americans, especially those in the second generation, to network with each other and unite in various ways, socially and politically (Espiritu, 1992). There is some evidence that such social networks may affect their speech patterns and others' perceptions of their speech. By identifying what is involved in such changes, this research can assist in understanding the social processes that lead to linguistic variation and change.

Extensive research of the phonological, morphological, and syntactic patterns of African Americans and Hispanic Americans over the past 30 years has shown that for these two groups, ethnic background is responsible for dialect boundaries (Labov, *et al.*,

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[1] For the purposes of this paper, the term "Asian American" will refer to persons of East or Southeast Asian descent who were born in the United States. This includes persons who claim Chinese, Filipino, Japanese, Korean, Taiwanese, or Thai ancestry. The usage of the term "Asian American" often relates to those of South Asian descent as well, such as persons of Indian or Pakistani ancestry, but they are omitted from this study to restrict the number of variables. Their omission is not a claim that they are not Asian American but is purely a methodological judgment.

1968; Ornstein-Galicia, 1981). The non-standard dialects of African American Vernacular English and Hispanic English have evolved, distinct from both standard American English or any local white American vernacular spoken in a given area. African American Vernacular English has been attributed partially to the migration of black speakers to the northern cities of the United States from the South after World War II, and Hispanic English is largely influenced by Spanish. On the other hand, most white ethnic groups have experienced a rapid assimilation to the local vernacular speech of their communities (Laferriere, 1979). Thus, some immigrants have "melted" at a faster rate than other into the white majority, historically following strong racial and ethnic boundaries.

Relevant research on the speech patterns of American-born Asians has been comparatively lacking; the little work that has been found in the literature deals with Japanese Americans in California. Addressing a study on Japanese American language behavior from the 1940s (Spencer, 1950), Mendoza-Denton and Iwai (1993) studied generational differences between second generation and fourth generation Japanese Americans. They concluded that while second generation Japanese Americans retained certain features from the substrate (Japanese) language, these features disappeared in fourth generation Japanese Americans, whose English has converged with that of the matrix dialect. They attribute these differences to changes in identity and social networks of the Japanese American community.

The Japanese Americans of the Mendoza-Denton and Iwai study are markedly different from the children of the post-1965 immigrants of the current study, however, in that the speakers that they dealt with have been in the United States for several generations. Moreover, as they settled, they became "the target of US governmental efforts to weaken and disperse their community" during World War II. This served to hasten their assimilation into white American society. The Asian American members of the present study, on the other hand, are second generation Asian Americans whose parents arrived in the country under more flexible social conditions for racial minorities. In addition, they have different linguistic histories by which to be influenced. Language is a strong factor in cultural identity, and some Asian Americans of the current group retain their identity by being bilingual in English and their parents' native tongue. Others speak only English.

spkr	ethnicity	place of residence	sex	age	2nd lang.	other comments	AC	WC	avg	diff
1	Filipino, Thai	Cherry Hill NJ; Washington Twp. NJ	F	15	N/A	Friends mostly non-Asian	69	40	54	29
2	white	Ft. Washington PA;Ambler PA	F	20	N/A		90	83	87	7
3	white	Glen Mills PA	M	20	N/A		50	38	44	12
4	Korean	Audobon PA; Gladwynne PA	M	18	Korean	Friends mostly Asian	61	67	64	-6
5	white	NE Philadelphia	M	22	N/A		79	72	75	6
6	Taiwanese	Cherry Hill	M	14	Taiwanese	Friends mostly Asian	90	83	87	7
7	Korean	Korea (until age 2), Cherry Hill	F	15	Korean	Friends mostly Asian	93	90	92	3
8	white	NE Phila.; Bensalem PA	F	19	N/A		80	83	82	-3
9	Chinese	NE Phila.; Chinatown-Phila.	F	20	Cantonese	Went to Chinese grade school	60	50	55	10
10	Korean	Phila.; Voorhees NJ	F	16	N/A	Lives with white stepmother; Friends mostly non-Asian	57	74	65	-17
11	white	Bensalem	M	18	N/A		67	60	64	7
12	Filipino	Cherry Hill	M	16	N/A	Friends mostly Asian	73	47	65	17
13	Chinese	Cherry Hill	M	21	Mandarin	Until grade 6, friends mostly non-Asian;after, mostly Asian	43	43	43	0
14	Chinese	Lower Gynedd PA	M	21	Mandarin	Friends mostly non-Asian	42	47	45	-5
15	white	NE Phila.	F	18	N/A		48	57	53	-9
16	Chinese	Boston (until age 2); Voorhees; Cherry Hill	M	21	Mandarin*	Friends mostly Asian	86	97	91	-11
17	Filipino	South Phila.	F	21	N/A	Friends mostly non-Asian	47	30	38	17
18	white	Berlin NJ	F	17	N/A		80	73	77	7
19	white	Narberth PA	M	20	N/A		80	73	77	7
20	Chinese	West Phila.; Ft Washington	F	20	Mandarin*	Friends in h.s. mostly Asian	40	47	43	-7

AC = % of Asian Americans identifying speaker correctly; avg. = total % of judges identifying speaker correctly; diff. = AC minus WC; h.s. = high school; N/A = not applicable; WC = % of whites identifying speaker correctly; * = lost fluency.

Table 1. Biographical and linguistic data for each speaker. Penultimate 3 columns show calculated percentages of the two judge groups in identifying the race of the speaker correctly. Last column shows the difference between the two groups.

This paper explores people's perceptions of Asian American speech as well as the question of whether second generation Asian Americans are distinguishable from those of the majority population. It is hypothesized that people can distinguish between Asian Americans and white Americans. If it is established that there does exist something different from the majority population, two possible routes these patterns could take are the retention of certain features from their parents' native language for several generations before assimilation, like pre-World War II Japanese American immigrants, or the creation of distinct new patterns, like in African American Vernacular English and Hispanic English.

2. Method

A number of field methods have been developed since the early 1960s in sociolinguistic research. The experiment uses what Labov (1984) calls the "family background" test, which attempts to gauge judges' sensitivity to markers of ethnic identity and stimulate research to determine what those features are.

Speech samples of 12 second generation Asian American (6 male, 6 female) and 8 Caucasian American (4 male, 4 female) native English speakers were recorded using a Sony TC-142 tape recorder. The Asian American subjects consisted of 5 Chinese Americans, 3 Korean Americans, 2 Filipino Americans, 1 Taiwanese American, and an individual of Filipino and Thai ancestry. In order to keep regional dialect differences to a minimum, only speakers who grew up in the Philadelphia area were selected. The speakers ranged from 13 to 23 years of age and consisted of students recruited from local schools known to have a relatively high percentage of Asian or Pacific Islander students (Cherry Hill High School East, Cherry Hill, NJ, 17%; Eastern Regional High School, Voorhees, NJ, 13%; University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA, 23%)[2] and personal contacts of the author. Table 1 gives more detailed biographical and linguistic information. The high school students in the study were

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[2] Individual figures were attained by calling the administrative offices of the respective schools. As a point of reference, Asians and Pacific Islanders made up 2.9% of the population of the United States in 1990, according to the U.S. Bureau of the Census.

approached at their school at the end of the day and interviewed about random topics such as their childhood experiences or their friendship circles, in order to facilitate their most natural voice. If they were Asian American, they were also asked questions about growing up as an Asian American, to get further feedback on the topic.

Speech samples were transcribed and analyzed for common phonological features. Certain passages from each speaker, controlled for content, were randomly spliced together to create the family background test, consisting of the 20 speakers (see Figure 1). 60 judges (30 Asian American, 30 Caucasian American)[3], of ages 15 through 30, were then recruited to listen to the 20 passages and make judgments as to the ethnic identity of each speaker. Judges were told that each speaker is a native speaker of English who grew up in the Philadelphia area and were asked to identify each speaker as either white or Asian. In addition, they were asked to state what cues, if any, they used to distinguish between the groups.

3. Results

It was hypothesized that the judges would be able to distinguish between the Asian American speakers and their white American counterparts. Scores for both the Asian American and white judges were calculated by the percentage of speakers the judges correctly identified. The Asian American judges correctly distinguished between the two groups 67% of the time ($\pm$ 11%), while the whites had a 63% success rate ($\pm$10%). These numbers were compared with a population mean of 50%, assuming that if the judges were randomly guessing, they would be correct 50% of the time. A hypothesis-testing method using the t distribution (a = .001) supports the hypothesis that both sample groups, Asian American and white, have a higher success rate than random guessing. The results sup-

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[3] From this point, the Asian American and white individuals who were interviewed and had samples of their speech recorded for the ethnic background test will be referred to as "speakers" ($n_1 = 12$, $n_2 = 8$), while the Asian Americans and whites who participated in identifying the speakers will be referred to as "judges" ($n_1 = 30$, $n_2 = 30$), to avoid any confusion between the two samples.

Asian-American identification test

age: __   **gender:** M   F   **date**: _____

race: Asian   black   native American   white   other ___

ethnic background: _____

place(s) of residence up to age 13: _____

native language(s): _____

The people on the tape are native speakers of English raised
in the Philadelphia area whose ages range from 13-23. They
are either white or Asian. Please circle which race you think
each speaker is.

1.	white	Asian	11.	white	Asian
2.	white	Asian	12.	white	Asian
3.	white	Asian	13.	white	Asian
4.	white	Asian	14.	white	Asian
5.	white	Asian	15.	white	Asian
6.	white	Asian	16.	white	Asian
7.	white	Asian	17.	white	Asian
8.	white	Asian	18.	white	Asian
9.	white	Asian	19.	white	Asian
10.	white	Asian	20.	white	Asian

Did the content of the passages affect any of your answers? If
so, please explain.

Were there any cues that you used to distinguish between the
Asians and the non-Asians?

Other comments appreciated:

Thank you!

Figure 1. Questionnaire form for the family background test
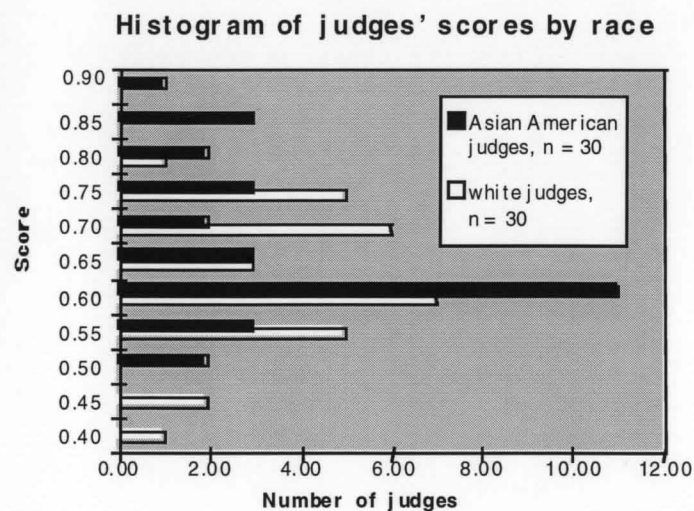
Histogram of judges' scores by race

Figure 2. Histogram showing each judge group's score on the Asian American identification test by percentage. (For Asian American judges, n = 30, μ = 67%, σ = 11%. For white judges, n = 30, μ = 63%, σ = 10%.)

port the claim that both groups can distinguish between Asian Americans and white Americans to a degree.

Figure 2 shows a histogram breaking down each judge group's score by percentage. It appears from the figure that the Asian Americans performed slightly better in distinguishing between the groups. A χ^2 test of independence found differences not to be statistically significant, however, so it may be that any linguistic cues that each judge group used to distinguish between ethnic groups were the same. In other words, ethnic group of the judges was not a statistically significant factor in determining overall which of the speakers are Asian American and which are white. This may have been due to the fact that the judges were all members of the University of Pennsylvania community, which has a high percentage of Asian Americans. It is nonetheless possible that some degree of special sensitivity exists on the part of the Asian

American judges, resulting in their slightly higher success rate over-all.

A more important conclusion to make results from a breakdown of the questionnaire by speaker, which shows that certain speakers were more easily identified than others by the judges (see Table 1). Specifically, speakers 6, 7, and 16 were most distinguishable as Asian American, chosen 87%, 92%, and 91% of the time, respectively, while speakers 2 and 8 were overwhelmingly chosen as white by the two groups, with rates of 87% and 82%, respectively. In addition, certain Asian American speakers were systematically judged randomly by both the Asian American and white judges, such as speakers 13, 14, 17, and 20, who were correctly identified only 43%, 45%, 38%, and 43% of the time, respectively.

4.   Discussion

The study was initiated as a result of casual observations by myself and my Asian American peers that there are Asian Americans who have unique sound patterns that are shared by other Asian Americans. Some judges felt that if an Asian American grows up speaking English, he or she should sound no different from others of the same geographical area. These respondents also felt that they were randomly guessing when taking the test.

While some claimed that they were guessing randomly as to the ethnic background of the speakers, the data shows otherwise. Many of the judges in this study, especially those who are Asian American, supported the initial hypothesis. One Filipino American female judge in particular, who had been mentioned previously to the author as someone who was particularly accurate in distinguishing Asian Americans from other Americans, for example, on the phone, proved her excellence in this skill by scoring 85%. Her boyfriend, who took the test at the same time as she did, performed even better, scoring 90%. These results are strong indications that differences in language behavior exist. Both judges, however, could not identify how they distinguished between the two groups, but only that there is a clear difference.

The speakers who were more easily identified than others tended to socialize more with other Asians (see Table 1). Speaker 16, a 21 year old Chinese American male from Cherry Hill, New

Jersey who is also fluent in Mandarin, was correctly identified by 86% of Asian Americans, and by 97% of whites. He was also identified by the aforementioned female judge as being obviously "Asian" sounding. Speaker 7, a 15 year old Korean American female from Cherry Hill fluent in English and Korean, also was more readily identified, by 93% of Asian Americans and 90% of whites. One cue that many of the Asian American judges mentioned noticing in the speech of Asian Americans, both in the test and among their friends, was a high rising pitch movement at the ends of statements, variously described as "upspeak", an "upward lilt", and "lack of assertiveness". In several of the statements included in the family background test, the two previously mentioned speakers make extensive use of high rising intonation. Figure 3 shows examples of fundamental frequency (F0) spectrums of their utterances obtained from interviews with the judges. Similar F0 patterns were observed in the passages used for the test.

Previous studies of intonation and attitude in American English (Watt, 1990; McLemore, 1991), as well as a report in the popular media in 1994 ("What teens are saying?", *The Philadelphia Inquirer*), have mentioned such intonation patterns in the speech of adolescents and, to varying degrees, in the speech of other individuals. Watt describes this intonational contour as a hybrid of a concave final rise in a complex contour. He accounts for it partly "by the function of marking continuation in narration, and hence, a signal of turn maintenance, and partly by the function of eliciting hearer supplementation in the form of back channel feedback".

The speech samples of the two speakers make liberal use of this intonational technique. Since both speakers claim to associate primarily with other Asian Americans in their social groups, it is possible that the high rising intonation at the ends of statements may be one of the patterns that Asian Americans use when speaking to one another in their social networks. Unique suprasegmental features have been previously recognized in African American Vernacular English (Tarone, 1973), and so it is possible that distinctive Asian American suprasegmental features are taking shape. However, it may be the case that the cause of this contour in their speech is due to their membership as adolescents. A third possibility is that Asian Americans may be making use of the contour at a greater rate than the young people of other ethnic backgrounds. That peo-
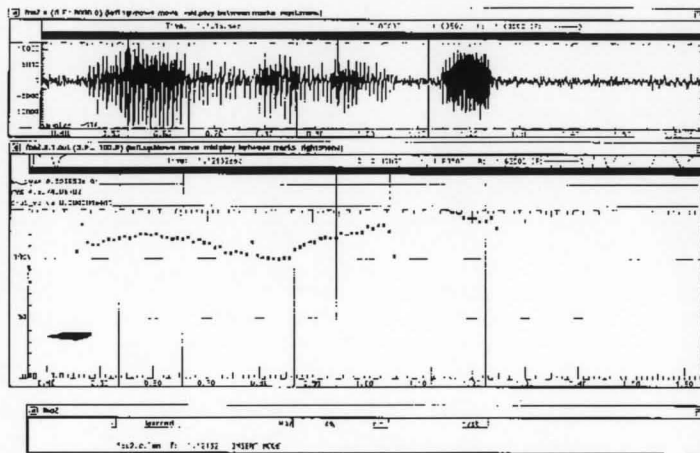
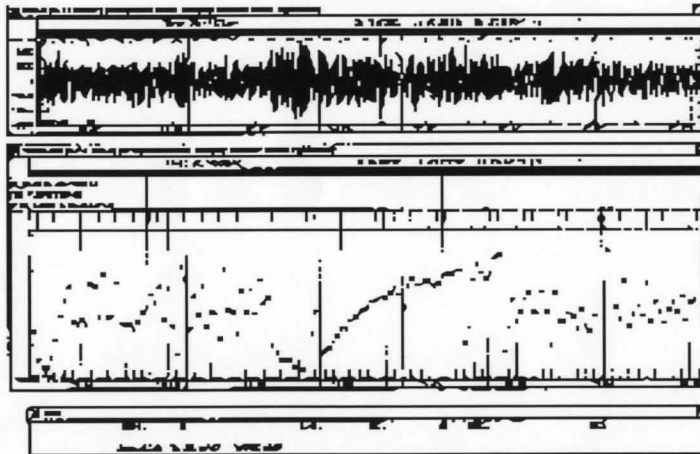Figure 3a. Speaker 16: "I learned Mandarin first."

Figure 3b. Speaker 7. "She's a quarter American."

Figure 3. F0 spectrums, measured in Hz, showing the L*H intonation contours described by Watt (1990) and McLemore (1991) and displayed by certain Asian American speakers. Note the significant difference in amplitude in the final step. The top picture for each example is a waveform of the passage, the middle picture shows the fundamental frequency, and the bottom picture is a transcription of the passage.

ple have noted it as a particularly Asian American characteristic lends greater support to the first and third possibilities. At the present time, the high rising contour seems a good candidate for a pan Asian American marker of ethnic identity. Further analysis into this phenomenon is in progress.

Other features that were mentioned by the speakers as particularly Asian American cues included "increased pauses between words" and "jerkier speech". They also mentioned that they thought the Asian Americans used more "filler material" in their sentences, such as words like "umm" and "like". All of these features seem to address issues of confidence on the part of the speaker. Whether these are actual features on the part of the speakers or simply subjective reactions of the judges is a complex matter to assess, and may involve elements of both.

Another finding is that that Asian American judges seemed to be able to identify monolingual Asian American speakers better than whites could (speakers 1, 12, and 17), but identified bilingual Asian Americans at a similar rate to whites (speakers 4, 6, 7, 9, 13, 14, 16). These observations suggest that Asian Americans may have a greater sensitivity to distinguishing other Asian Americans, because they are more involved in intra-Asian American social networks and thus come into contact with other Asian Americans more often than the white Americans do. The L*H intonation was only observed in speaker 1 in these monolingual examples, and so it still must be realized what other cues Asian Americans may be using to identify them. The Asian American judges' similar performance to white Americans in distinguishing bilingual Asian Americans might be explained by the more easily discernible L*H intonation in their voices or possibly by interference from the Asian language in the bilinguals, causing the differences between these Asian Americans speakers and their white American counterparts.

The monolingual Asian American speakers who were more distinguishable to the Asian American judges all happen to be of Filipino descent, and so an alternate view is that Asian American judges may be able to pick out Filipino American speakers better than the white judges can. It is possible that Filipino Americans have some feature specific to them which makes them more readily recognizable to other Asian Americans, but this observation may be entirely coincidental.

The trend of identification differences between monolingual and bilingual Asian Americans is reversed for speaker 10. The data in Figure 1 for speaker 10, a 16 year old English speaking Korean American female who lives in Voorhees with her white stepmother, and keeps mostly non-Asian friends, show that whites actually identified her better than the Asian Americans did. Since it is hypothesized that Asian American language behavior stems from social interaction with other Asian Americans, it follows that most people would identify her as white when hearing her voice, since it is not influenced by other Asian Americans as much.

The question remains, do I sound Asian to you? The preliminary data presented in this paper support the hypothesis that some Asian Americans have distinctive linguistic features that are reinforced by social interactions with the same ethnic group. The present study attempted to gather data from a wide range of Asian Americans to stimulate research into more specific features. The diversity of the sample group proved to make the process fairly complex, but was necessary to characterize such a heterogeneous group. One possible direction to explore is the study of a larger sample group of Asian Americans who associate primarily with other Asian Americans to look at their suprasegmental features. The present experiment was performed in Philadelphia; it would be of interest to perform a similar study on the West Coast, where there are a greater number of Asian American ethnic enclaves. A claim of one Taiwanese American female judge from Voorhees, New Jersey who spent a summer in Berkeley, California that "[Asian Americans] speak totally different there" supports such a prospect. The subject is exciting because it is a group in which changes are in progress, due in large part to the constant influx of new Asian Americans into the United States. Sociolinguistic research should delve further into the speech patterns of this understudied group to more fully characterize this phenomenon and to uncover the trends of a rapidly changing and significant part of the American population.

Acknowledgments

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619 Williams Hall
University of Pennsylvania
Philadelphia, PA 19104–6305

dhanna@ling.upenn.edu