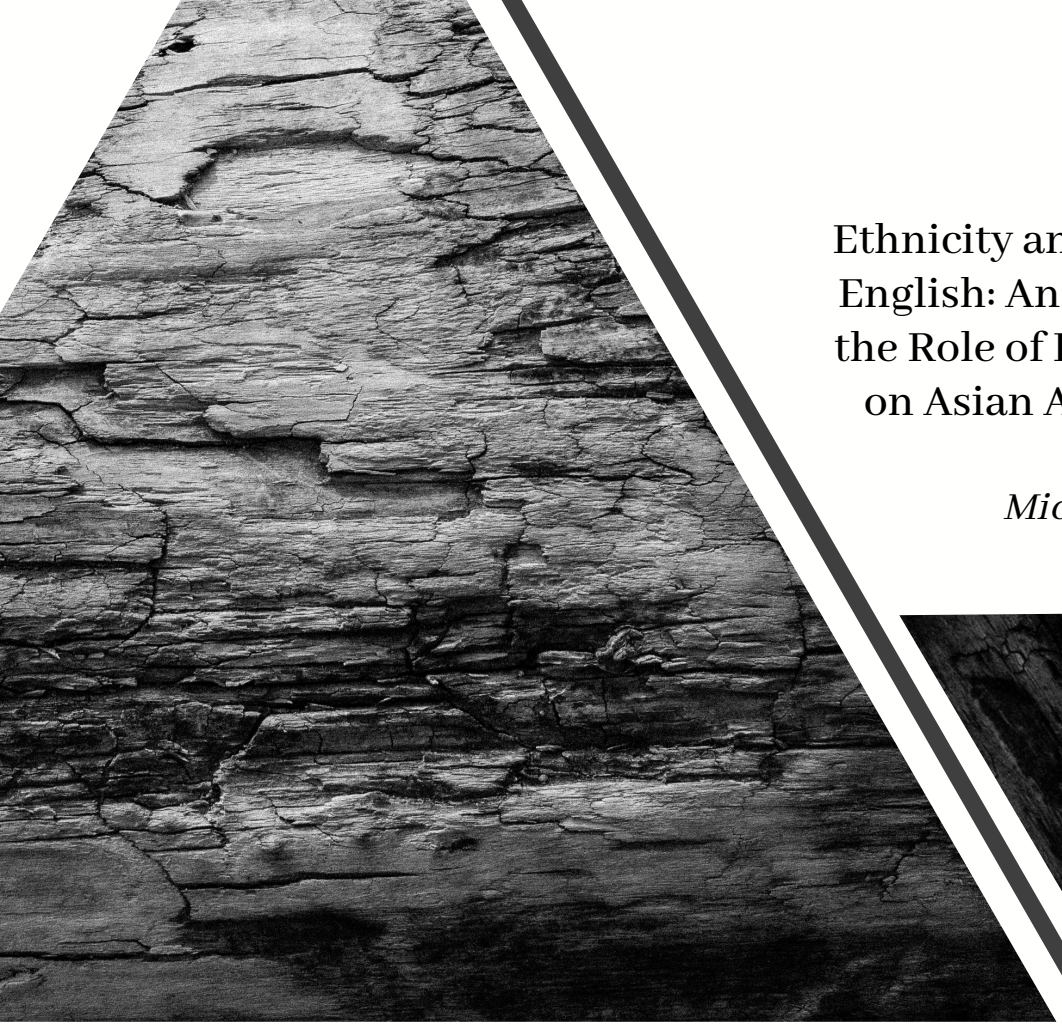

Ethnicity and North American English: An Investigation into the Role of Heritage Language on Asian American English

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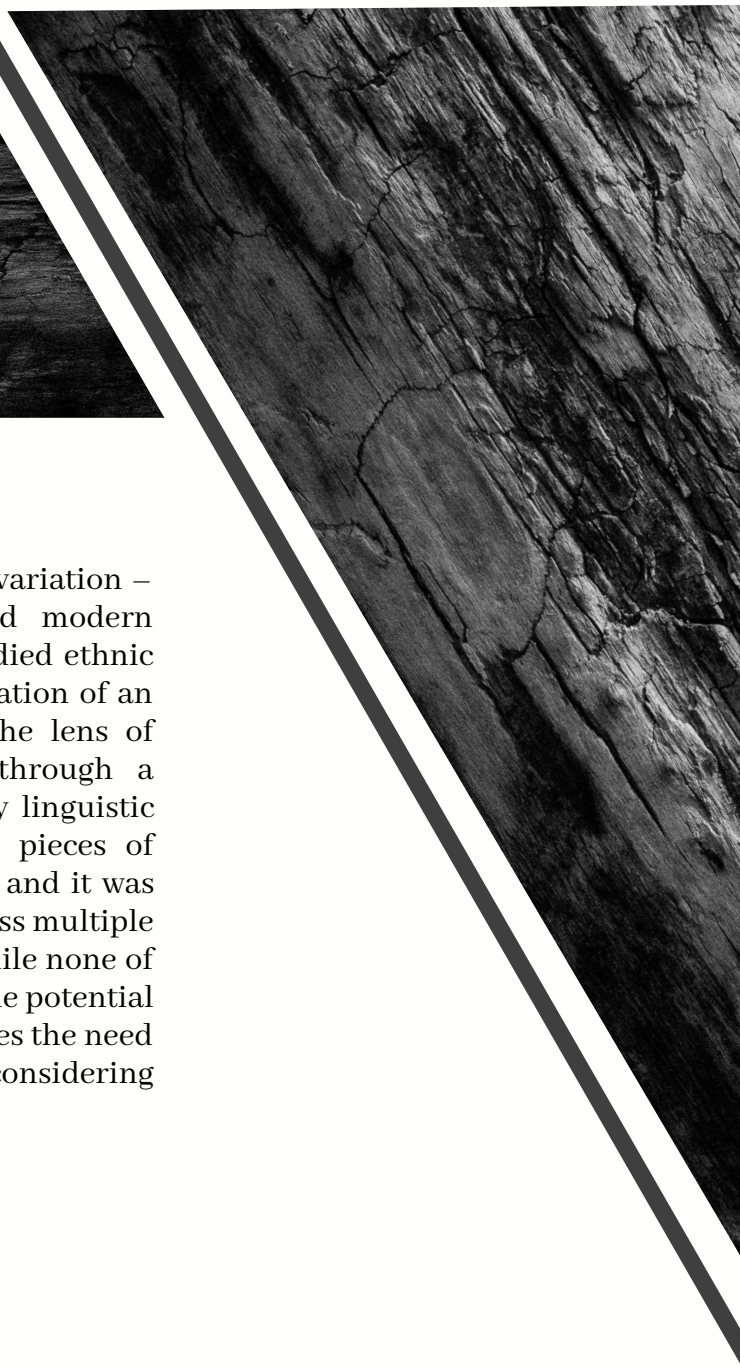

Abstract

It is clear that ethnicity can play a role in language variation – this is a relationship that has long interested modern sociolinguists. This paper investigates a lesser-studied ethnic group, Asian Americans, for the potential identification of an Asian American ethnolect, specifically through the lens of heritage language and ethnicity. Approached through a literature review, this paper strives to identify key linguistic markers that appear in different studies. 5 key pieces of research in this area were identified and reviewed and it was found that there are some markers that appear across multiple studies as identifiers of Asian American speech. While none of the studies reach a definitive conclusion, all show the potential and need for further research. This paper emphasizes the need to consider racial identity as a variable when considering group belonging and ethnolects.

In the past, many sociolinguistic studies have investigated ethnicity as a variable for linguistic variation. Labov's 1972 *Language in the Inner City* looked at features of African American Vernacular English, while Wolfram & Walter A. (1969) studied African American English in Detroit. The linguistic features of other varieties of North American English, such as AAVE, are well documented and have been studied by other linguists as well. However, research on the speech of Asian American English is lacking in comparison (Hanna, 1997). This paper investigates five different articles about the identification of an Asian American English and seeks to explore the role of heritage language and ethnicity on native English speakers, with the goal of evaluating the hypothesis of whether it can be argued that an Asian American ethnolect exists.

For the purposes of the paper, "Asian American" refers to those of East Asian descent, though the term has a much broader scope in reality. Asian languages, with an emphasis on Chinese, are chosen as the focal point of this paper for two reasons: the ethnicity of the author and the linguistic differences between English and many Asian languages. The author herself is Chinese Canadian, with English as her dominant language. Moreover, a common hypothesis among Asian Americans/Canadians in her peer group is that it is possible to identify other Asian Americans/Canadians based on speech alone; similarly, this hypothesis is a motivating factor of two of the papers investigated – Hanna 1997 and Newman & Wu 2011. Furthermore, English and Chinese differ in linguistic elements such as stress, intonation and tone, consonants, voicing, clusters, vowels, segmentals, suprasegmentals, and more. As such, Asian languages are ideal for investigating potential substrate transfer and contact effects between the heritage language and community language.

Historically, Asian American English has been less thoroughly explored. This could be partly due to the shorter history of Asian American groups in North America. Other ethnic groups with longer histories in North America, however, have been investigated by sociolinguists, such as African Americans/Canadians and Italian Americans/Canadians. Asian American immigration to the United States and Canada only began in 1850 (Library of Congress, UBC Library). Afterwards, there was increasing anti-Asian sentiment, resulting in the head-tax and Chinese Immigration Act in Canada, the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 in the United States, and various other policies from Canada and the U.S. to stop immigration from all Asian countries (UBC Library, US Department of State). It is only as recent as 1947 in Canada and 1965 in the U.S. that East Asians have been able to freely immigrate. Furthermore, it is possible that Asian American English, specifically that of East Asians, has not been investigated due to the "model minority" myth. Part of this myth assumes that East Asians assimilate into the social and residential areas of society in order to achieve the "smart and successful" framing (Junn, Masuoka, 2008), so it is possible that linguists assumed there would be language assimilation as well. Additionally, since Asian Americans benefit from the positive framing of the model minority myth, there may be less motivation to form group racial identity as compared to other ethnicities (Junn, Masuoka, 2008). Yet at the same time, Asian Americans suffer from the "forever foreigner" syndrome (Junn, Masuoka, 2008) and East Asians are consistently seen as the "yellow peril". Both terms perpetuate a stereotype that Asians are untrustworthy and, plagued by their otherness, present an existential threat to the western world. As such, despite Asian Americans being more privileged than other minority groups in North America, it is clear that they are still

seen as their own distinctive group. As a result, there may be a desire to signal group belonging, which provides a sufficient environment for an ethnolect to develop.

Hoffman and Walker's 2010 paper "Ethnolects and the city: Ethnic orientation and linguistic variation in Toronto English" focuses on investigating the ethnic dimension of sociolinguistic variation in Canadian English. Their goal was to "identify linguistic features associated with the English of different ethnic groups in Toronto and the way in which such features are used". The data set included 60 informants of Italian and Chinese heritage, sorted by generation and sex, with a group of 20 Torontonians from the founder-population ethnicities serving as the control. Additionally, Hoffman & Walker use Ethnic Orientation (EO), which measures '*degree of ethnicity*', as a variable in their data collection, hypothesizing that those with higher degrees of EO will show linguistic contrasts with those who have lower EO. Accordingly, they found that the EO scores for all first-generation speakers were higher than the second and third-generation speakers of the heritage language. Furthermore, Hoffman and Walker examined two linguistic variables: (t/d)-deletion in word-final consonant clusters (TD) and the Canadian Vowel Shift (CVS). For TD, it was found that all Chinese informants delete t/d more frequently compared to the control group, and that first-generation Chinese do not share the same system of TD with the control. When investigating the Canadian Vowel Shift, first-generation Chinese showed no participation in CVS. Second and third-generation Chinese with a high EO participated in the CVS to a low extent, while those with a low EO participated in the CVS to a higher extent (although this was significantly lower than the control group). Hoffman and Walker found that even though EO does seem to influence linguistic variation, it is not straightforward. Despite finding that high and low EO speakers exhibit slight differences in the preceding segment for TD, there could be other factors that could account for this, and for the CVS there are group disparities.

By taking a subjective approach to ethnicity, Hoffman and Walker set out to investigate the role of ethnicity in linguistic variation. Acknowledging that ethnic identity cannot be shared equally by all members introduces another social variable that may influence linguistic variation, allowing for a more nuanced interpretation of data. Moreover, since Hoffman and Walker's 2011 paper investigates ethnic identity, the use of community members as interviewers puts interviewees at ease when discussing certain aspects of ethnic identity. However, enclave status and the CVS is determined impressionistically in this study, which raises concerns of subjectivity. It is unclear if authors reached a consensus on enclave status before assigning each interviewee a high or low EO status, nor is it clear how enclave status is initially determined. Furthermore, Hoffman and Walker look at sex as a social factor contributing to TD and the CVS, but in the context of this paper it would have been beneficial to divide ethnic group and EO status by sex to investigate if there was a difference between women and men within each subcategory. This would perhaps aid the paper in avoiding overgeneralization of ethnicity orientation results. In addition, the Chinese informants in this paper were referred to as speakers of Chinese; however, Chinese is an imprecise term as there are many dialects of Chinese spoken in China (Kurpaska, 2010). It seems probable that the Chinese informants' heritage language is Cantonese as the study was restricted to those who were born in or could trace ancestry to Hong Kong or Guangdong province where Cantonese is the main dialect (Cantonese Profile, UCLA), yet this is never clarified. It would have been relevant to a paper studying Asian American linguistic markers to

specify the dialect, as there are varying attitudes towards the Cantonese dialect in Hong Kong and the official national dialect, Mandarin (Mee, 2011). Potentially, these attitudes towards the Chinese dialects could affect the EO of speakers. However, when considering the scope of the research question, Hoffman & Walker did have sufficient evidence to support their initial hypothesis "that speakers with higher degrees of EO would differ linguistically from speakers with lower degrees of EO".

Wong 2007, "Two Vernacular Features in the English of Four American Born Chinese", tracks the use of vernacular features [ɔ]-raising and [æ]-tensing in New York City English among American Born Chinese in New York City as linguistic markers of group affiliation and identity. Wong hypothesized that since these linguistic variables are closely associated with group belonging in NYC, other ethnic groups may adopt these variables as a way of mainstream identification. Wong found that informants showed the caught/cot distinction. Furthermore, height distinction in [æ]-tensing is not exhibited; however, variable rates of the use of [æ] were found among the speakers. Wong proposed that social categories such as age, occupation, and education do not distinguish the speakers, rather their social networks do. An investigation was conducted into Chinese dominant and non-Chinese dominant networks, which were then correlated with Chinese and American lifestyles. As a result of this categorization, Wong found that those who have non-Chinese dominant networks and an affinity for an American lifestyle favour the high [ɔ] and show a more polarized fronting distinction in [æ]. Those with Chinese dominant networks and a Chinese lifestyle disfavour the use of high [ɔ] and make no fronting distinction in [æ]. As such, Wong concludes that raised [ɔ] and tensed [æ] "enable informants to negotiate and index their positions within a complex system of distinctions and identity constructions" (228).

Raised [ɔ] and tensed [æ] are linguistic features of NYCE studied by Labov in 1966, revealing that they have strong associations with New York's Italian and Jewish ethnic groups, which allows Wong to compare her findings with previous data and support her hypothesis. The sociolinguistic interviews consisted of conversation reading passages, and a wordlist. The format is similar to Labov's sociolinguistic interview, but the formal style makes it unclear if the vernacular is reached. This issue is addressed in section 5.1 of the paper, where Wong found that style is not a significant factor in [ɔ]-raising – unlike previous studies. Wong states that this may be due to the formality of the interview style and the reading passage. As such, the results may not reflect the speech of the informants, thus altering the accuracy of the results. When evaluating social networks and lifestyles, Wong assigned the informants an American and a Chinese lifestyle rating based on their responses to the lifestyle questionnaire. However, this is a subjective measure, based on the author's own interpretation of an American versus a Chinese lifestyle. Moreover, as the lifestyle questionnaire is not provided in the paper, it is difficult to evaluate if the questions were biased, how the informants answered, or even how scores were assigned to each answer. Additionally, a score of difference was assigned to each informant by subtracting the Chinese lifestyle score from the American lifestyle score. Although this score of difference serves its purpose in the paper, it also linearizes and simplifies lifestyle, which disregards the nuances of lifestyle and ethnicity for an informant, an issue that is later acknowledged by the author. As such, it would have been interesting for the author to look at the phonetic features studied on a continuum of Chinese and American lifestyle.

In an examination of perceptions of Asian American speech, David B. Hanna's 1997 paper "Do I sound 'Asian' to you?: Linguistic markers of Asian American Identity" sets out to determine whether the speech of second-generation Asian Americans are distinguishable from the speech of the majority. He introduces the hypothesis that people can distinguish between Asian Americans and Caucasian Americans by certain linguistic features and aims to explore what these features are. Using Labov's family background test (Labov, 1994, cited in Hanna, 1997), Hanna measures judges' sensitivity to linguistic markers of ethnicity. He uses speech samples from 12 second-generation Asian Americans and 8 Caucasian Americans; both speech sample sets were divided evenly by sex. Then, 60 judges (30 Asian American and 30 Caucasian American) made judgements about the ethnicity of the speakers. Hanna found that the Asian American judges correctly guessed 67% of the time, and that the Caucasian Americans were successful 63% of the time. Using statistical analysis, it was determined that both groups of judges have a higher success rate than random guessing, thus supporting the initial hypothesis. Many Asian American judges noticed a high rising pitch movement at the end of statements in Asian American speech. This intonational contour is found in both speech samples by Asian Americans in the study. Hanna proposes the hypothesis that Asian Americans may be using this intonational contour at a higher rate than other ethnic backgrounds, which makes it an ideal candidate for a developing Asian American suprasegmental feature that can be used to identify ethnic background. Furthermore, participants reported that Asian American speech sounded "jerkier" and had more pauses between words – another potential suprasegmental feature that could define Asian American speech.

The participants in Hanna's study were high school students approached at the end of their school day and interviewed about random topics to collect a sample of data. However, there is a possibility that the vernacular speech was not collected due to the nature of the interviews. It cannot be guaranteed that the students used their most "natural voice" (Hanna, 1997) when approached by an unknown adult after school hours. Moreover, it is unclear if all speech samples produced had the same phonological features, which would affect how judges distinguish between Asian American speakers and Caucasian American speakers. Additionally, the judges were all members of the University of Pennsylvania, which the author states has a high percentage of Asian Americans, and this exposure may have increased the white judges' sensitivity to linguistic contrasts. An expansion on this paper could have white judges, who do not normally interact with Asian Americans, distinguish between Asian Americans and white Americans to test if the linguistic contrasts are salient enough to hear a difference. The data collected in this paper supports the initial hypothesis that some Asian Americans have identifying linguistic features, thus serving as the starting point for more work in the identification of a unique Asian American English. Hanna establishes that if there exists something different in Asian American speech from the community language, there are two possibilities: the retention of certain features from the heritage language for many generations before assimilation or the creation of distinct new ethnolects like in AAVE.

Michael Newman and Angela Wu's 2011 paper "'Do you sound Asian when you speak English?' Racial identification and voice in Chinese and Korean Americans' English" attempts to identify an Asian American English by exploring three questions: 'How able are judges of different backgrounds to discern speakers of Asian background compared to those who index

other racialized groups?', 'Are these judges able to distinguish Korean from Chinese Americans?', and 'Can any phonetic cues be identified as potentially indexing Asian identity?'. In an identification study, Newman & Wu used speech data from a sixty-word passage and asked judges to identify the ethnic background of the speakers. The results showed that there were many misidentifications of the Asian Americans; yet simultaneously all the Asian Americans received more identification as Asian when compared to the other ethnic groups. To answer the second research question, evidence for identifying the difference between the speech of Korean Americans versus the speech of Chinese Americans is weak. As a result, the data points to a degree of sensitivity to sounds associated with Asian American identity, but little sensitivity to internal Asian American difference. Additionally, a sociophonetic study of certain suprasegmental linguistic features found no evidence for any role of jitter or shimmer (the frequency instability and the amplitude instability of the sound wave, respectively), but that phonation type differed between Asians and non-Asians. Rhythm was not found to be a linguistic feature that differentiated Asians from other groups, but there is greater syllable timing for Chinese Americans. Whereas VOT scores and /ɛ/ seem to be at the ranges of the non-Asian speakers, prevocalic /r/ seems to be differentiated, with low realizations by Asian speakers. Interestingly, Newman & Wu found that no Asian American speaker presents all linguistic markers of ethnic identity, yet none lack all, and this combination of linguistic features provides empirical support for "sounding Asian".

For the speech samples, Newman & Wu included speakers from outside the Asian American and European American community, which allowed judges to choose from more options. The variety of options reduced the potential of judges guessing the correct option. Furthermore, all speakers read a sixty-word text for the speech samples, which allowed for a universal data set that overcomes differences in phonological environments that may alter the speech produced. However, the reading task does not elicit vernacular speech, which affects the use of standard and non-standard varieties of English – an effect that is documented in earlier studies (Labov 1966). As the goal of Newman & Wu's paper is to find linguistic features of Asian American English that set it apart from European English, the formal speech style may have impeded the identification of these features as the speakers may have felt compelled to alter their speech patterns. A strength of the methodology used for the judges is that data from the judges were collected online, where the judges could reply at home. As such, no researcher was present at any point of the data collection. This could make judges more comfortable as they respond and less likely to doubt their own responses, as there is no researcher who would know the "correct" answer. Newman & Wu present the difference in Asian American speech by analyzing phonetic features and suprasegmental features, ultimately succeeding in their goal of identifying phonetic cues indexing Asian identity. However, they do not account for these differences as a result of substrate transfer or otherwise. In the future, an interesting direction for this paper would be to find trace features of the heritage languages studied in the English of Asian Americans.

Chapter 5 of Lauren Hall-Lew's 2009 PhD dissertation "Ethnicity and Phonetic Variation in a San Francisco Neighborhood" investigates back vowel fronting in the residents of the Sunset District of San Francisco, California. Hall-Lew proposed that younger speakers of Sunset District will front the GOOSE and GOAT vowels further than older speakers. Moreover, she hypothesized that if non-White speakers avoid or are late in the adoption of White-led changes,

then there should be more fronted projections of back vowels by European Americans when compared to Asian Americans, which could be a marker of linguistic ethnic identity. Hall-Lew found that for vowels of the GOAT class, speaker age is the strongest social predictor of variance and that Asian Americans reflect the broader pattern of GOAT fronting. For TOO, Hall-Lew found it correlates significantly with speaker age for women and not for men, but unlike GOAT there is no interaction between age and ethnicity. When investigating COOP, the range of fronting patterns is larger for COOP than TOO. Furthermore, speaker age was not a predictor for production, and the greater variability in COOP suggests that patterns for COOP are less stable. GOAT-GOOSE fronting correlates with speaker age, and correlations with class and ethnicity were not found; thus Hall-Lew found that Asian Americans are not behind European Americans in back vowel fronting. It was also found that there is no statistical difference between ethnic groups, though Asian Americans front GOAT more. Hall-Lew's data challenges claims that non-Whites avoid local sound change, as proposed initially in the hypothesis.

By analyzing individual sound segments with certain phonological features of interest, Hall-Lew was able to find correlations between social factors such as age, sex, and ethnicity with certain vowels. The strength of this paper lies in its nuanced interpretations of the results, where each social factor was interpreted against the other. This allows for all correlations to be investigated, which eliminates a possible misinterpretation of results. For example, a correlation with age was further investigated as age among Asian Americans, European Americans, females, and men. As such, though there was significant correlation with age and the linguistic variable studied, it was found that among men there was no significance. Thus, the interpretation of results is well-rounded. Moreover, Hall-Lew accounts for influences from other languages where she states that heritage languages may inhibit fronting, a consideration that sets this paper apart from the rest. However, this paper only looks at linguistic variables individually, not within the context of the sentence. As such, only phonological analysis could be performed. This is problematic because a speaker testimony in Chapter 3 (3.3 *Neighborhoods & Ethnicity*) revealed that a speaker thought that a Chinese heritage native English speaker he knew spoke "staccato and choppy". This is a suprasegmental property that would have been interesting to investigate, especially since it was brought up as a marker of Asian American identification by a participant. Nonetheless, Hall-Lew's paper accomplishes what it initially set out to do: look for the relationship between ethnicity and back vowel fronting in San Francisco's Sunset District.

All the papers investigated and analyzed sought to account for linguistic markers of Asian American speech, with different approaches and variables investigated. Among two of the papers — Hoffman & Walker 2010 and Wong 2007 — a common factor was a survey determining ethnic orientation or affinity. Hall-Lew 2009 had an ethnicity topic as part of the interview process; however, ethnic orientation was not considered. Newman & Wu 2011 and Hanna 1997 did take into account the social network of the speakers, but this was not a variable that was investigated when interpreting judgement data. Whereas Hoffman and Walker's investigation focused on the role of Ethnic Orientation on linguistic variation, Wong's 2007 paper focused on the role of social networks and lifestyles. Newman & Wu expanded on Hanna's 1997 identification study of Asian American speech by not only improving on the identification study itself, but also performing a sociophonetic study to identify the linguistic differences of Asian American English. Hanna (1997), Newman & Wu (2011), and Hall-Lew (2009) mentioned the suprasegmental properties,

such as rhythm and intonation, but did not investigate further, as it was limited by scope of the paper or lack of data. Though all the papers examined found correlations between ethnicity and linguistic markers to varying extents, Newman & Wu (2011) considered the broadest range of linguistic variables, from phonetic variables to suprasegmental, whereas the other papers only looked at one or the other. Interestingly, as a result of the broad range of variables investigated, Newman & Wu (2011) put forth the compelling hypothesis that it is the combination of features that identifies Asian American speech – a hypothesis that should be further explored.

From the evidence presented in these papers, it is entirely possible that there exists a general Asian American ethnolect. However, more investigation must be done to identify specific linguistic features that mark the ethnolect. Rhythm, intonation, and syllable-timing are described to be differentiating features by Hanna, Newman and Wu, and Hall-Lew, which suggests that this could be a potential marker of the ethnolect. This could indicate substrate transfer effects in rhythm and intonation, but further research must be done. However, as Newman & Wu found that there is little difference in rhythm among women while Chinese men were more syllable timed (Newman & Wu 2011), sex must be accounted for when exploring these suprasegmental properties. Furthermore, it would be interesting to integrate Hoffman and Walker's multigenerational approach and Ethnic Orientation variable to Newman & Wu's combination-of-linguistic-variants approach. Though Hoffman and Walker do not directly investigate the existence of an Asian American ethnolect, they interpret the "differences within ethnic groups as evidence for the weak interpretation of ethnolects", proposing that rather than tracing ethnolects to an imperfect L2 acquisition, substrate transfer, or lack of exposure to the community language, the reason may lie in ethnic identity. This hypothesis should also be further explored, in tandem with a consideration of other varieties of English, such as Singaporean English or Malay English, which are influenced by dialects of Chinese (Yeo & Deterding, 2003). This compare-and-contrast approach between Asian American English and (South) East Asian English varieties would allow for greater understanding of potential substrate transfer and contact effects between the heritage language and the dominant language. As the fastest growing racial and ethnic group in the US (López, G, 2020) and the second largest ethnic group in Canada after Europeans (Statistics Canada, 2016), Asian American speech would be interesting to investigate for linguists. As such, sociolinguistic research should dive deeper into the speech patterns of Asian Americans, but race and ethnicity need to play a key role alongside linguistic research methods in order to properly characterize the ethnolect.

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