

## **"Oh [o:], I'm the token Asian": A potential vowel marker of ethnic identity**

Carina Bauman (*New York University*)

This paper reports on the pronunciation of GOAT vowels as a potential ethnic marker among a group of Asian American college women in central New Jersey. Two distinctive features of this vowel are discussed: 1) its relative backness, and 2) its monophthongal quality.

As reported by *The Atlas of North American English*, the fronting of GOAT is a widespread change in progress, with the Mid-Atlantic region the most advanced, and the North and Canada maintaining a conservative, back position (Labov et al. 2006, p. 157). Fronted GOAT has been well documented as a feature of Philadelphia English (Labov 1980, 2001; Labov et al. 2013), and more recently, as part of the California or Western Vowel Shift (Hinton et al. 1987; Eckert 2008; Hall-Lew 2009).

The present data come from interviews with 15 female speakers conducted as part of an ethnographic study of an Asian American sorority. They are all native speakers of English, 21-24 years old, of Chinese, Vietnamese, and Korean descent. All the speakers were raised in the Mid-Atlantic dialect region (specifically, New York City, New Jersey, and Delaware).

Compared to a sample of 7 non-Asian female speakers of similar age and from the same region, the Asian speakers have a backer GOAT, with an average normalized F2 of 1457 Hz (N=528), compared to the non-Asian speakers' average of 1730 Hz (N=56). This pattern also holds at the individual level: considering the combined average F2 of 1594 Hz, five of the non-Asian speakers fall above this average, while none of the Asian speakers do.

Impressionistically, the Asian speakers also tend to produce more monophthongal GOAT tokens. This auditory impression is confirmed by a measure of formant change from the vowel onset to offset, with the Asian speakers showing on average about 30% less movement in F1 and F2 than the non-Asian speakers.

Together, these features lead to a distinctive pronunciation of GOAT words which may serve as a marker of Asian American identity. While Chun (2009) describes backed, monophthongal /o/ as a feature of "Mock Asian" English, so far this vowel has not been explored as an ethnic identity marker among native English-speaking Asian Americans of varied descent.

That the Asian speakers in this study resist GOAT-fronting contrasts with Hall-Lew (2009), who finds that Asian Americans in a San Francisco neighborhood show change in apparent time toward fronted GOAT, while European Americans don't. Together, these findings suggest that research on regional sound change needs to take into account the interrelationship of place and ethnic identity. Furthermore, this study adds to the growing body of work on Asian Americans which is filling a crucial gap in the sociolinguistic picture of the United States.

## References

- Chun, Elaine (2009). Ideologies of legitimate mockery: Margaret Cho's revoicings of Mock Asian. *Beyond Yellow English: Toward a linguistic anthropology of Asian America*, ed. by A. Reyes & A. Lo, 261-287. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Eckert, Penelope (2008). Where do Ethnolects Stop? *International Journal of Bilingualism* 12, 25-42.
- Hall-Lew, Lauren (2009). Ethnicity and phonetic variation in a San Francisco neighborhood. PhD dissertation, Stanford University.
- Hinton, Leanne, Sue Bremner, Hazel Corcoran, Jean Learner, Herb Luthin, Birch Moonwomon, and Mary Van Clay (1987). It's not just Valley Girls: A study of California English. *Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Berkeley Linguistics Society* 13, 17-127.
- Labov, William (1980). The social origins of sound change. *Locating language in time and space*, ed. by William Labov, 251-66. New York: Academic Press.
- Labov, William (2001). *Principles of linguistic change, vol. 2: Social factors*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Labov, William, Sharon Ash, and Charles Boberg (2006). *Atlas of North American English: Phonology and sound change*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Labov, William, Ingrid Rosenfelder, and Josef Fruehwald (2013). One Hundred Years of Sound Change in Philadelphia: Linear Incrementation, Reversal, and Reanalysis. *Language* 89(1), 30-65.