

The Hmong Among Many: A Descriptive Analysis of a Southern Interlanguage Variety

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While Asian Americans are perceived as a distinct racial group, phonetic variation studies have remained inconclusive, and there are even fewer studies of sound change among the ethnic group (Wolfram & Shilling-Estes 2006; Fought 2006). While the amount of studies is dearth, when they are addressed, it is focused mainly on “language maintenance issues or code switching” (Chun 2001), and rarely on feature linguistic portraits of Asian Americans whom have grown up within the United States. Within the frame of Asian American English, this paper offers study within one particular ethnicity in cross-section with regional variation: the Hmong American community in the South.

Bilingual Hmong Americans have shown some accommodations to the local norm in Minnesota (Ito 2010), although the contact language has shown less nasalization than Hmong (Kaiser 2012). Limited language variation studies have explored Southern Hmong American speakers, perhaps out of consequence of recent tides of migration (late 1990s). The field site for this study in rural Hickory, North Carolina features the largest population of Hmong Americans in the South. Unlike the participants in the previous study, those in the South are relocating in a “third wave migration,” a conscious decision for some rather than involuntary migration.

20 young second-generation bilingual Hmong Americans are acoustically analyzed from the rural Southern city to see if they accommodate to their European American counterparts. Historically, the large working class community may have impacted the speech of its habitants, as sound patterns are more cognizant of towns further west of the Appalachian Mountains (Kohn & Franz 2009). However, young European Americans in the study are experiencing retraction of the Southern Vowel Shift as seen in neighboring urbanized contexts (Fridland 2008; Dodsworth & Kohn 2012).

Using a linear predictive coding analysis (LPC), the vowels of Hmong Americans were shown to be reminiscent of European American speakers, except for back vowels, possibly a transference from the Hmong language. A look at prosodic variation among Hmong individuals in Wisconsin and North Carolina reveal speakers have similar speech rhythms, regardless of the matrix dialect. The Hmong Americans in the South have also adapted the -ING and IN alternation of their European American peers. While some morphological elements were distinct, there may be interlanguage effects of learning English as a second language. Additionally, interspeaker variability may hint, not at allegiance to a European American standard or a disparate vernacular, but as an index for social identities. My research adds to discussions of particular similarities and distinctions that constitute ethnolinguistic varieties, as well as lend cultural implications of Asian American identity inherent in speech.

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