

Not sounding like a “white girl” and speaking “English with slang”: Negotiation of Hmong American Identities in Minneapolis-St. Paul

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The third wave of variation study emphasizes the importance of language ideology and its role in constructing the meaning of variation by focusing on style and agency; linguistic variables do not carry consensual fixed meaning, but rather present indexical mutability (Eckert 2008, 2012). Research on Asian American language practices has uncovered the appropriation of features from African American varieties for negotiating identity (Bucholtz 2004; Reyes and Lo 2009; Shankar 2008). Many quantitative studies analyzing vowel production, however, reveal that young Asian Americans often share some features with young middle-class whites (Hall-Lew 2009; Wong 2007). Moreover, recent scholarship on language and ethnicity demonstrates individuals' ethnic self-representation can be highly layered and nuanced (Benor 2010, Hall-Lew and Yeager-Dror 2014). These findings raise the following questions: how do these adaptors and communities perceive an incorporation of white-led speech where the presence of non-mainstream speech is highly viable? How do these speakers position themselves in the local linguistic landscape in negotiating their social identities?

This study builds on the author's previous work on Hmong English in Minneapolis-St. Paul (2010), which analyzed vowel production of 35 Hmong speakers (across age, gender, and age of arrival) and 18 young middle-class white speakers from the region for comparison. Results indicated that young Hmong Americans tended to accommodate to mainstream norms for /æ/ raising, but not for the apparent *caught-cot* merger observed in the speech of the young whites. The current study focuses on the language regard (Preston 2010) of two young Hmong Americans "May" and "Chris" whose vowel production was not only nearly identical to one another but also to their young white counterparts, including the apparent *cot-caught* merger. Metalinguistic comments are from the original interviews, prompting exploration of ethnic identity (ethnic identification, language preference/practices in daily life, attitudes about the importance of ethnic culture, and experience and perceptions of discrimination); we used “tactics of intersubjectivity” (Bucholtz and Hall 2004), particularly “adequation” and “distinction” for analysis.

Despite comparable vowel production, the language regard of the two participants is strikingly different, demonstrating the variability that indexical field (Eckert 2008) shows. May feels ambivalent about being teased about "not having accent" by her white friends instead of feeling flattered. To counter her young nephew's criticism of her speaking like a "white girl," she associates her speech with education, not whiteness. Chris proudly declares his bilingual skills: "I tend to speak my style of English and Hmonglish"; he describes he speaks "English with slang... We don't speak really proper English anymore"; however, he distances himself from African American vernacular by switching references-- "[e]ven though it's not proper like 'they are' sometimes they say 'they is' *on* accident. We understand what they're trying to say."

Although their language regard appears to be incompatible, their strategies are remarkably similar: using locally prominent linguistic varieties to index their own speech. Moreover, these Hmong Americans skillfully avoid associating themselves in terms of a local “white/non-white”

racial dichotomy, choosing instead to construct a cultural "third place" (Kramsch 2010) for marking their unique identities.

Table 1: The angle between /æ/ and /ɛ/ and the the Euclidian distance between /ɑ/ & /ɔ/ by ANAE speakers, Euro-Americans, and Hmong Americans in the Minneapolis/St. Paul area. Angle calculation: $\tan \theta = ((F2 /æ/ - F2 /ɛ/)/(F1 /æ/ - F1 /ɛ/))$ Fabricius (2007:302). $0 < \theta < 90$ denotes /æ/ is below and in front of BET

| | ANAE (n=4) | EAM (n=8) | EAF (n=11) | "Chris" | "May" | HAM (n=21) | HAF (n=14) |
|---|---------------|--------------|---------------|---------|-------|---------------|---------------|
| Angle between /æ/ and /ɛ/ | 96 | 79 | 75 | 85 | 75 | 36 | 12 |
| Euclidian distance between /ɑ/ & /ɔ/ | 192 | 90 | 126 | 118 | 128 | 244 | 211 |

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