

***Creating Belonging in San Francisco Chinatown's  
Diasporic Community: Morphosyntactic Aspects of  
Indexing Ethnic Identity***  
Adina Staicov (2020)

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Chinatown, in Adina Staicov's careful study, is a place of belonging for the Chinese diaspora in the United States where language, and particularly varying repertoires of English, play an important role in constructing ethnic and generational identities. Staicov's study focuses on the use of three key morphosyntactic features by speakers that index diasporic belongings within the Chinatown community. She draws on contemporary variationist sociolinguistic perspectives in which these features are considered to be resources in linguistic repertoires with which speakers construct their own identities and positions. More specifically, she demonstrates how generational differences in group membership are constructed through language use and how some prestige features have emerged in the Chinatown community. Staicov's study involves multiple methods for documenting and analyzing the relationships between ethnic identity and language, and her discussion frequently touches on the role of the researcher as an out-group member and ways to mitigate these effects. This book will be of interest to scholars interested in variationist sociolinguistics and language and identity as well as those working on diasporic language communities. It is well suited for graduate students working on language and ethnicity and varieties of English in heritage language communities.

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In Chapter 1, Staicov opens with an introduction about the importance of studying the oldest Chinese diasporic community in North America, San Francisco's Chinatown. San Francisco's Chinatown, with its historic transnational population, provides a valuable area to examine for Chinese American linguistic practices. The author discusses the overall aim of investigating how morphosyntactic variation correlates with group identity construction and negotiation. In this case, Staicov investigates how first- and second-generation Chinese Americans negotiate between group identities that Staicov considers 'mainstream' American and Chinese American identities and contributes towards the larger conversation of the relation of language and transnationalism.

Three research questions are provided that explain why studying this community is best done ethnographically with attention paid to the sociocultural histories of the region. Staicov gives three hypotheses that will be tested both quantitatively and qualitatively: (a) that first-generation and older speakers will show higher ethnic identity affiliation; (b) that first-generation speakers will show higher frequencies of non-standard variants in speech; and (c) interlocutor effect and positive ethnic orientation will be more influential in the speech of second-generation speakers. The goal of the study then is to demonstrate that speakers who demonstrate greater Chinese ethnic identity or affiliation to Chinatown will use more of the nonstandard variants, although this use might be sensitive to context. Chapter 1 further discusses the migration patterns that have contributed to the formation of San Francisco's Chinatown as well as the reasons for including the concepts of diaspora and transnationalism as theoretical frameworks in the book. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the organization of the rest of the book.

Chapter 2, 'San Francisco Chinatown: Introducing the community', introduces the community and the research methods and participants of the study. This chapter is particularly useful for researchers interested in language and place (Reed, 2020) and how the evolution of place can affect social identity and belonging. The author begins the chapter with a thorough yet concise overview of the sociocultural history of San Francisco Chinatown, which serves as a backdrop for how the author intends to approach the community ethnographically. Staicov discusses how San Francisco Chinatown began as a trading hub between America and China for geographical and economic reasons and how Chinese immigrants, particularly from the Canton region, built social networks and businesses that aided in helping families and friends navigate life between the two regions, showing the historicity of transnationalism in the area. Staicov also reviews some of the challenges and discrimination Chinese immigrants had to overcome. The author argues that Chinese immigrants were initially viewed

favorably but eventually came to be seen as a threat to white Americans, which led to the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1884. The chapter discusses the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1884 that officially ended in 1943 and the further improved social status of Chinese Americans after the Civil Rights Movement. The historical background ends with a discussion of Chinese Americans and San Francisco Chinatown today explaining that, even though some Chinese Americans have left the neighborhood, it still serves as a harbor for Chinese culture, institutions, and businesses.

The second half of Chapter 2 provides details on recruitment and participants. Staicov discusses the fact that fieldwork lasted over the course of nine months and a bottom-up approach to eliciting responses was used due to the researcher's outsider status. The author describes some of the difficulties of doing ethnographic research as an outsider as her primary contact canceled the initial offer to assist in the project, leading the researcher to seek out participants through Chinatown organizations, churches, and flyers. The researcher's positionality as a Swiss national outsider noticeably placed some limitations on the study, especially when the 'friend of a friend' method was unsuccessful and led the researcher to find most participants in a local church. Staicov shows that respondents to flyers were first-generation Chinese Americans and second-generation Chinese American respondents mostly via church organizations, with the sample skewed towards female participants. She inevitably divided second-generation participants into older and younger groups. The chapter ends with a brief overview of how the researcher uses the sociocultural history of Chinatown to inform data collection and modes of analysis.

In Chapter 3, 'Ethnolinguistic variation in North America', Staicov provides an overview of variationist research and a 'sociolinguistic overview' of San Francisco Chinatown. She argues that, despite a wealth of research on sociolinguistic variation in the United States, little is known about Chinese American varieties of English. She notes that 'forever foreigner' and 'honorary white' stereotypes play a role in Asian American invisibility in variation research as Chinese Americans are often considered to be highly assimilated and English-speaking (without noticeable variation). Staicov argues that certain morphosyntactic features, however, used within Chinatown index ethnic identities. Here Staicov draws on the notion of ethnolinguistic repertoires (as opposed to one stable variety) to examine the complexity of variation among members of this ethnic group.

Chapter 3 reviews studies of phonological variation in well established (and researched) communities such as Amish communities in Pennsylvania, Orthodox Jewish communities in New York, and some other less studied areas such as

Korean American speakers and concludes with a discussion of the socially constructed nature of ethnic identities. Much of this chapter, however, is dedicated to examining research conducted with Chinese speakers in the United States that focuses on the importance of in-group ethnic identity, birthplace, and other factors important to Staicov's own study, such as age and social networks. Finally, the chapter concludes with an overview of Cantonese vs. Mandarin use in SF Chinatown and the motivations for learners (for instrumental purposes such as jobs or more identity-related heritage concerns).

Chapter 4, 'Ethnic identity and morphosyntactic variation in San Francisco Chinatown', presents the methodology and findings for the linguistic analysis of the study. The multiple method study included a sociolinguistic questionnaire as well as quantitative and qualitative analysis of two contexts of spoken language: an interview with out-group member Staicov and a focused discussion with an in-group member of the Chinatown community (usually a friend or relative). Findings from the questionnaire indicated that participants fell into three main groups: those with strong ties to Chinatown and the heritage language, those who were Americanized with little affiliation with Heritage Language, and those with transnational ties and high investment in Chinese language maintenance. Further, while most of Staicov's participants (57%) self-identified as 'Chinese', there were clear differences for first and second generation participants as first generation members were more likely to choose 'Chinese', and second generation choosing about equally 'Chinese' (32%), 'Asian American' (30%), and 'Chinese American' (29%).

In Chapter 4, 'Ethnic identity and morphosyntactic variation in San Francisco Chinatown', Staicov introduces the morphosyntactic features of Chinese American English that she examines: past tense marking, number marking, and article use. All three of these features are susceptible to 'substrate influence' as they are not present in Cantonese (the dominant first language of San Francisco Chinatown) and are variable in 'non-standard' varieties of English (p. 90). Overall, Staicov found that first generation speakers showed more morphosyntactic variation when using English and that for the second generation, positive ethnic identity and more interlocutor effect was found for older members. The findings reported in Chapter 4 regarding generational difference and speakers' metalinguistic talk about grammar (pp. 88–89) in particular have interesting implications for understanding the intersections of second language learning and ethnolinguistic identities as the use of more standard features of English is related to the participants' identity scores. But, as Staicov notes, the use of non-standard features varies across contexts. Most notably, men were found to use more nonstandard features than women did in this study. Staicov concludes

that variable tense marking and article use may be features of a prestige Chinese American variety of English for masculine-identified speakers. Further, a small number of participants who commented on grammar in the interviews or discussions noted the effects of schooling and importance of learning Standard English in school settings. The effects of schooling and literacy are important factors that could play a role in the variation and ethnic identification found in younger generations here.

Chapter 5, 'Constructing Chinese Americanness in San Francisco Chinatown', provides a qualitative analysis to gain an understanding of how participants construct identities through discourse. In the first section, Staicov discusses 'self-labeling': how first-generation participants preferred 'Chinese' and second-generation participants preferred 'Chinese American' in the older group and 'Asian American' in the younger group. This section shows how participants explained their reasoning for self-labeling in relation to a variety of social, cultural, and even educational experiences. Though participants provided different reasons for the self-label, it is interesting that no participant simply chose 'American', which the researcher claims is significant when considering San Francisco as a diverse city, Chinatown as its own ethnic community, and occasions of othering in Chinese American experiences. The next section specifically deals with experiences of othering, beginning with reminding readers of the Chinese Exclusion Act. The author's knowledge of the sociocultural history of the region specifically aids in helping contextualize some of the participants' responses. Staicov argues that several instances relate to Tuan's (1998) evaluation that Asian Americans tend to be othered as either being 'honorary whites' or 'forever foreigners' in America. Despite the history of discrimination towards the Chinese community, Staicov discusses that many respondents viewed their social standing as progressing.

The third section of Chapter 5 considers the role of Chinatown for the participants. Staicov shows how the older second generation, though many have moved away, fondly remember Chinatown and still have childhood friends from the neighborhood. In contrast, first generation and younger second-generation participants remembered it as loud and crowded, showing how Chinatown is always evolving and changing through time. Staicov argues that especially for older second-generation participants, Chinatown plays a large role in identity formation, whereas the younger generation had more mobility in and out of Chinatown and the first generation viewed it like living in China. The conclusion of the section examines place and space with discussions of constructions of 'home'.

The fourth section provides a discussion of the role of the heritage language in the community. The author gives an insight that proficiency in the heritage language did not necessarily correlate with valuing the heritage language. To some participants, the heritage language of the community had a more symbolic relationship to the community's larger social identity, showing the ongoing negotiation of participants' levels of Chinese-ness. The fifth section discusses transnationalism and how the ties to place are experienced through different generations. Staicov gives an interesting observation about how the economic situation of participants, and the rise of globalization, gave way to younger generations having the ability to travel internationally more frequently. The subsequent section also deals with transnationalism, but with more of a focus on the linguistic complexity of Chinatown and how language is perceived and practiced in the community. The rise of China as a global economic power gives hints that Mandarin may be emphasized more in the future of the community because of its rising status. The final section concludes the chapter with aspects of ethnic identity in discourse with Staicov's belief that the community largely views its language, traditions, and culture positively and wants to see it preserved in the future.

In Chapter 6, Staicov reviews her findings and provides explanations. In particular, she notes the heterogeneous nature of ethnic identity and difficulty in finding consistent patterns across consultants in her study. She makes a compelling case for variation across different age groups and ethnic affiliations, however. One interesting finding here is the fact that those participants who had strong transnational ties to China were more likely to maintain the heritage language. Staicov contrasts this to Sharma's (2014) findings in Indian communities in the UK (where more variation in English was observed), suggesting that the lack of a national variety of English in China plays a role in the lack of stability in certain speech styles. She further concludes that transnational ties in the Chinese American community played a role in maintaining the heritage language (as opposed to using more non-standard features).

In Chapter 6, Staicov further discusses the limitations of the study, a notable one being the sample size, and offers an interesting discussion of analyzing syntactic vs. phonological variation. She further makes suggestions for analyzing and coding interview data, including creating different versions of the interview questions for first- and second-generation participants and involving participants in the coding process. Bringing together the heterogeneity in ethnic identity that Staicov noted in her participants' interview responses with these suggestions for methodological changes, it seems that Staicov has hit on one of the core conundrums in doing research on ethnic identity and language and, in

particular, the challenges of attempting to quantify and homogenize individuals' experiences. More contextualized discourse analytic approaches might provide more nuanced understandings of individuals' intrapersonal style shifting and the heterogeneity across group members (cf. Hudley, Mallinson and Bucholtz, 2020).

While Staicov presents a solid account of sociolinguistic variation in Chinese American English, she stops short of proposing theoretical contributions of her work beyond documenting language use and its relationship to belonging in Chinatown. In our opinion, however, the contribution of her study is not simply an analysis of whether Chinese Americans use certain features in their speech and why, but rather how language, ethnicity, and place coincide to construct the fluid, place-based identities that Staicov notes are prevalent in her data from a very specific neighborhood with its own place identity. Language is essential to constructing place as Liu's (2016) study of the linguistic landscape of Washington, DC's Chinatown demonstrated, and Staicov's findings here build on the notion of the linguistic construction of place as the use of specific linguistic features as well as Chinese languages by individuals in this place signal belonging and membership. Studying the languages and linguistic repertoires of Chinatown offers a unique examination of language and place.

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