Ethnicity and Locality: Linguistic Variation among a Vietnamese American Student Group

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Although a body of sociolinguistic research on Asian Americans has been growing in recent years, focus has been placed on East Asian groups, such as Korean (Chun, 2001) and Chinese (Hall-Lew, 2009; Wong, 2007) Americans. While people of Korean and Chinese descent are two of the largest Asian groups in the U.S. according to the 2010 U.S. Census, other Asian groups, such as Filipinos, Indians, and Vietnamese, are increasingly represented. In some areas, Southeast Asians heavily represent the Asian American population, such as the metropolitan area of Minnesota. Despite their growing presence, Southeast Asians are sometimes viewed separately from other Asian groups as indicated by references such as “the other Asian” or “new wave” (Reyes 2003). Circulating discourse about Southeast Asians presents challenges for how these speakers negotiate their identities in their local communities and with regard to other Asian groups.

This research investigates the linguistic practices of members of a Vietnamese student group at a university in Minnesota, situated within a community of practice (Eckert and McConnel-Ginet, 1992; Wenger, 1998) framework to circumscribe a group of speakers as well as a definition of identity as constructed in interaction (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005). Two questions are addressed: 1) How do these speakers use linguistic features in the construction of their identities in this organization and their local community? 2) What discursive practices orient these speakers to or away from local and national definitions of Vietnamese and Asian American? An analysis of two features found in the metropolitan area of Minnesota, raising and fronting of /æ/ and the low back merger, finds small differences between these speakers and a comparable sample of European American speakers from this metropolitan area. The way that the student group members talk about their ethnicity and Vietnamese Americans illuminates more contrasts between these two communities.

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