

The Identity Behind Funny:
Sociolinguistic Analysis of Contemporary Asian American Comedians

An Analytical Research Study

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Abstract

According to the United States Census Bureau, the U.S. population increased 9.7% from 2000 to 2010. Comparably, the population of Asian or Asian in combination in the U.S. has increased 45.6%. As people of minority races in the U.S. grow, so does the representation of them in popular culture and mass media. From ABC's TV show *Fresh Off the Boat* to the generation of young Asian Americans starring in their own YouTube videos, a wave of Asian American linguistic presence in media is higher than ever before. In my research, I will discuss a close analysis of sociolinguistics connected to contemporary Asian American comedians in the media to provide perspective on their influence on the general public's view of Asians. As Author Jess C. Scott states, "People are sheep. TV is the shepherd." The media lays a foundation to the ideology of Asian Americans for the viewers.

Introduction

A simple conversation and occurrence catapulted my research into Asian American linguistics in media. I had a conversation with a Caucasian American friend of mine in which I asked him, "If you never met me and talked to me over the phone, would you know by my voice that I am a 30 year old Asian American woman?" He replied, "No, I would think you are a 17 year old white girl." Another occurrence I recalled was when I attended high school in which a student sitting next to me cheated off my math test without my knowledge. When we both received our scores back as a 65/F, the shocked student responded, "I thought Asians were good at math."

In these two occasions, the disconnection between my appearance and my characteristics were made apparent. By my outer appearance, the approximate 85% of non Asian Americans had created an assumption to what I may sound and act like.

Problem Statement

In her TED Talk "I Am Not Your Asian Stereotype," Canwen Xu states, "Only a small portion of the people around me are actually racist, but rather majority are clueless" (Xu 2016). By this, she makes a point that there is a lack of education on Asian American identity. She claims that their beliefs on her ethnicity are not intentional, but rather an outcome resulted by society and

culture. Analysis of Asian American linguistics in media is a sub part study of disconnection in pragmatic crossing of language and Asian American identity to society's ideology.

Definition of Sociolinguistics

The Oxford English Dictionary defines sociolinguistics as “the analysis of language or its structure” (OED). In his book, *Social Linguistics and Literacies*, James Paul Gee covers Discourse Analysis and states that to understand sense-making in language, “it is necessary to understand the ways in which language is embedded in society and social institutions” (Gee 129). His claim confirms the existence of rooted society's effects in making one's sense making in language. He breaks down communication through language even further and stresses the importance of *who* the speaker is and *what* is said: “Anytime we act or speak, we must accomplish two things: (1) we must make clear *who* we are and (2) we must make clear *what* we are doing” (Gee 168). The identity of Asian Americans relates to their sociolinguistic study that the *who* of Asian Americans in the U.S. are created by, or heavily influenced by the media representation. At Kennesaw State University, professor Jeanne Bohannon defines sociolinguistics to her students as “the study of language and its contextualized rules that are determined by discourse communities and influenced by four social factors: home life, education, religion, media” (Bohannon 2018). Although the specifics to home life, education, and religion of each individual may vary, the media output is readily open to view and study to further researched. By previous claims, the study of Asian Americans' media presence in society is crucial in understanding society's perceived outlook on Asian Americans as a discourse group.

Language and Race Overview

The importance of media to the general public's understandings is very much intertwined. The weight that media's influence has upon the American people as a whole must not be

underestimated. In describing “The Persistence of Yellow Peril Discourse,” in their book *Asian Americans and the Media*, Kent A. Ono and Vincent N. Pham define the impact of media upon a discourse group: “Media discourse includes news articles, TV programs, films, and Internet sites. Discourse is produced and organized in particular ways and serves as the basis by which ideas are formed and knowledge is produced, and, ultimately for how people relate to other people and how societies are formed and structured” (Ono, Pham 26). The writing entails that the presented media, in its subjects and language, is so embedded to society’s understanding of their perception of truth that it cannot be separated. Therefore, the study of identity and speech of Asian American performers in media is necessary to understand the disconnection of perceived outer appearance and individual characteristics of the rest of the Asian Americans settled in the United States.

Asian Population

How many people of this Asian American discourse group exist? According to the 2016 United States Census Bureau’s article published through “Profile America Facts For Features,” there is an estimate of 20.3 million U.S. residents in 2014 that identify themselves to be Asian alone or in combination. Measured out of the total 325.7 million Americans, this makes the minority group 6.2% of the total US population. However small this percentage may seem, their released graph of Asian Americans percent of growth in a 10-year span from 2000 to 2010 reveals the immense growth:

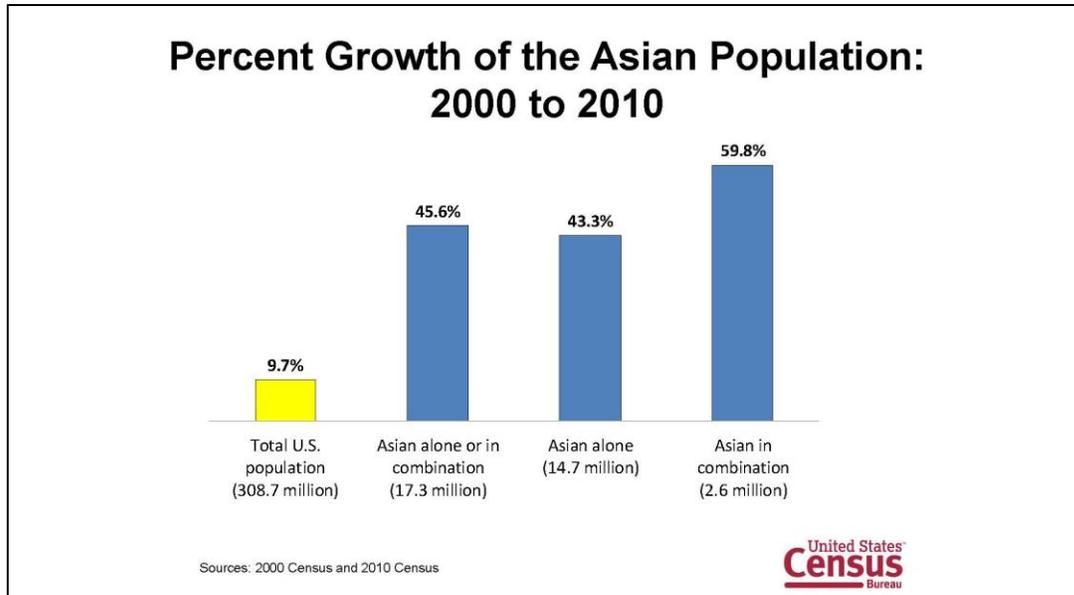


Figure 1. Bar graph of Asian Population growth in the United States 2000 to 2010

Based on Figure 1, the U.S. Census Bureau released an article titled “2010 Census Shows Asians are Fastest-Growing Race Group.” Before the increased population of this ethnicity was measured, David B. Hanna took note of the trend and conducted an experiment in 1997 in regards to linguistics spoken by Asian Americans.

Previous Research

Claiming that many studies have been done on African American linguistics and Hispanic American linguistics, but not Asian American dialect, David B. Hanna sets out in controlled environment of Philadelphia to discover this narrow path. In his article titled with a question, “Do I Sound ‘Asian’ To You?” Hanna conducts an experiment that will measure the association of one’s Asian American ethnic identity to their speech. His methodology was described: “Speech samples of 12 second generation Asian American and 8 Caucasian American native English speakers were recorded” (Hanna 144). For the second part of the experiment, “60 judges- 30 Asian American, 30 Caucasian American ages 15 through 30- were then recruited to listen to the 20 passages and make judgments as to the ethnic identity of each speaker” (Hanna

145). In his results, he states, “The Asian American judges correctly distinguished between the two groups 67% of the time, while the whites had 63% success rate” (Hanna 145). With the received numbers, Hanna concludes that there are indeed strong indicators of differences in language behavior. However, he suggests, “Sociolinguistic research should delve further into the speech patterns of this understudied group to more fully characterize this phenomenon and to uncover the trends of a rapidly changing and significant part of the American population” (Hanna 152). The media’s representation affects the now high Asian American presence in the U.S. and is ripe for study.

News articles also reveal a primary source on language, or lack of, to one’s Asian American identity. Connie Zhou’s article “The Asian-American Awakening: That Moment When You Realize You're Not White” on the Huffington Post speaks to her personal experiences growing up Americanized but appearing Asian in the modern day Ohio. Although English was the first and primary language she was taught from birth, her quiet nature placed her in ESL: “I was a shy Asian girl and everyone jumped to the conclusion that I couldn’t speak English” (Zhou 2017). Zhou’s teachers had a disconnected understanding of her ethnic appearance to her spoken language, which was a fluency in English. Stories of stereotyping are a common thread that seems to be repeated by many Asian American voices in contemporary mass media. The linguistic approach taken from this article is that a lack of it, or silence, also had an impact on society.

I will utilize James Paul Gee and Bohannon’s definition to language as the foundation to analyzing the linguistics presence of contemporary Asian American comedians in media. David B. Hanna’s provides measurable data behind Asian American linguistics and Connie Zhou’s Huffington post brings to light a lack of language crossed with society ideologies.

Methodology

My research is specific to the pragmatic cross between language and race, specifically to English speaking Asian Americans in United States. I observed and analyzed the dialect and subject choice of contemporary Asian American comedians present in YouTube videos and Netflix specials. In order to limit global dialect differences, my study was conducted to five popular Asian American comedians. They include Jo Koy, Margaret Cho, Ali Wong, Henry Cho, and Bobby Lee. The list of contemporary Asian American comedians' ethnicities range from Korean, , half-Vietnamese half-Chinese, and half-Filipino half-Caucasian. Their stand-up comedy performances present primary references of their personal experiences in their own dialect as an Asian American living in today's United States.

Analysis

Comedian	Ethnicity	Current Age	Region of Birth	American Dialect	Media Reviewed
Jo Koy	Half Filipino Half Caucasian	47	Tacoma, WA	Pacific Northwest	"Jo Koy: Live from Seattle" on Netflix 2017
Margaret Cho	Korean	49	San Francisco, CA	Pacific Southwest	"Margaret Cho: PsyCHO" on Netflix 2015
Ali Wong	Half Vietnamese Half Chinese	36	San Francisco, CA	Pacific Southwest	"Ali Wong: Baby Cobra" on Netflix 2016
Bobby Lee	Korean	45	San Diego, CA	Pacific Southwest	"Korean War" on YouTube 2012
Henry Cho	Korean	55	Knoxville, TN	Coastal Southern	"Henry Cho on Ferguson" on YouTube 2011

Figure 2. Chart of Asian American Comedians, Ethnicity, Age, Region, Dialect, and Media Reviewed

Figure 2 categorizes the name of the contemporary Asian American comedian studied, their ethnicity, current age, place of birth, their perceived dialect, and their media reviewed. Individual linguistic features and reference to identity are noted below-

Jo Koy

Jo Koy, born Joseph Glenn Herbert, is a 47-year-old, half-white and half-Filipino, professional stand up comedian. As a second generation Asian American based out of San Francisco, California, he presents no stipulating dialect that may prevent clear communication of his stories to the audience. However, in referencing his mother, he presents her voice with a heavy Asian accent. His most widely viewed video to date is a 2017 stand up comedy performance for a live special on Netflix from Seattle, Washington. His struggle with identity in relation to decisions in his career is revealed in a 2015 interview with Q102.1 Radio Station of San Francisco Bay area with host and interviewer, Freska Griarte. Jo Koy states his struggles on rising to fame in a longer 15-year span in his 25-year career by turning down Asian specific parts in an attempt to part his ethnic identity with his skill and talent:

I didn't want anyone to know that I was Asian yet. I was telling people that I was Asian, but I didn't want to do Asian shows. I wanted to keep myself away from that, because I wanted to show people that I was just funny (Koy 2015).

Margaret Cho

Originally named Moran Cho, Margaret Cho was born December 5, 1968 in San Francisco, California. Similar to Jo Koy, Cho likes to imitate her first generation mother in a heavy Asian accent to bring laughs to her audience. She would also fluctuate to a Californian "valley-girl" in referencing her own interactions with friends. Additionally, she uses her stand up comedian platform to engage the audience to struggles of a second generation Asian American, specifically

to creating her first Asian American family TV show, *All-American Girl* (1994-1995). In her 2015 Stand-Up performance taped at the Gramercy Theatre in New York, New York, she shares her struggle in presenting a media that society was not ready for:

I actually created the first Asian American family TV show...20 years ago. And I f*cked it up so badly, they had to wait for an entire generation of Asian Americans to be born and grow up to Nielson voting age. (Cho 2015)

Ali Wong

Ali Wong is a 36 year old, half-Chinese and half-Vietnamese, actress, writer, and comedian. Her speech ranges from Californian to AAVE dialect in certain subjects. She speaks of her usual activity with her new husband in a diverse and global America:

I grew going to private school, too. Him [her half-Filipino half-Japanese husband] and I are total, like, private school Asians. We both are big hippies, too. We like to backpack through Southeast Asia. We like to do yoga. We do ayahuasca ceremonies. We do silent meditation retreats. That's right, we pay \$800 to shut up for a weekend. (Wong 2016)

Bobby Lee

Bobby Lee also uses his performance platform in speaking on his discomfort in occurrences specific to his ethnicity, Korean. In his Pacific Southwest dialect- a familiar dialect from southern California- he tells of his conversation with a veteran from the Korean War:

I just get nervous when race is brought up. I'm an American citizen. I was at a Starbucks- this really happened- this old man came up to me, he goes, 'Are you Korean?' I got scared, I'm like, 'yeah.' Then, he goes, 'I fought in the Korean War.' I don't know what

to say, to say thank you or cool hahaha? Ya know? But what came out of my mouth was 'me too'. (Lee 2012)

Henry Cho

Henry Cho at 55 years old and from Knoxville, Tennessee, holds a heavy Southern dialect, distinguished from the previous comedians popularly from California. As he introduces himself in *The Late, Late Show with Craig Ferguson*, he sets the expectations for his audience:

My name is Henry Cho. I'm a full-blooded Korean. I was born and raised in Knoxville Tennessee. I don't speak Korean, though, cuz uh, they didn't offer it in my high school. I took Spanish. (Cho 2011)

Discussion

The five contemporary Asian American Comedians discussed in this study each used their stable performance platform to speak in a genuine dialect, portraying American English fluency. Furthermore, they share from primary references that work through their identity as Asian American in current U.S., and if was shared by a non-Asian ethnicity, the joke would not land appropriately to the audience. For example, if Henry Cho's introduction in *The Late, Late Show with Craig Ferguson* noted above, intermingled with his Southern dialect, was copied by a Caucasian American, his not knowing the Korean language would not come off as ironic but already assumed to be true by his appearance. James Paul Gee notes, "one and the same act can count as different things in different contexts, where context is something people actively construe, negotiate over and change their minds about" (Gee 168). Without defining the meaning of his statement, by ways of saying "Not all Korean Americans can speak Korean," Cho educates

the audience in identity of an Asian American discourse, actively negating stereotypical belief through humor.

However popular these Asian American comedians' presence became in media, the call for population to media's racial representation is still in pursuit. Dino-Ray Ramos wrote an article titled "Asian Americans On TV: Study Finds Continued Underrepresentation Despite New Wave Of AAPI-Led Shows," for Deadline.com stating, "the new study found that 69.5% of TV series regulars are white while 14% are black and 5.9% are Latino. Mono-racial AAPI (a person of single or multiple Asian or Pacific Islander heritage) make up 4.3%, while Multiracial AAPI (person of Asian or Pacific Islander heritage and non-Asian heritage) account for 2.6%" (Ramos 2017). This data shows gaps between population and equivalence in media representation.

My study was limited to the study of Asian American comedian dialects, whereas the sociolinguistic presence of Asian American performers in television, film, and YouTube videos are yet to be explored. Their sociolinguistic studies will provide a rounder understanding of dialectal differences in Asian Americans. Furthermore, the broken English portrayed by K-pop, or the Korean wave in popular culture, stars also influence the ideologies of Asian American identity in the U.S.

Conclusion

The huge influx of Asian population continues to grow, and the television network and streaming Internet videos portray various platforms for Asian American linguistic presence in media. These media portrayals continue to add to the unique identity of each Asian American individual and are dividing presumptions across the entire discourse group. Additionally, an increase in

education via reports, articles, and TED Talks are abundantly available. The data showing growth in population of minority races suggest that the study of pragmatic crosses between linguistics and race *must continue* in order to understand the sociolinguistics of United States as a whole.

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