Spill the Tea: Boba and Lexical Variation in Speech Communities

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Introduction

What's in a name? Lexical variation is one of the key markers of division within speech communities. Even small word choices reveal speakers' idiolects and the groups they identify with—everything from age and ethnicity to hometown and social class. Many of the best-known American dialect studies illuminate these distinctions with common words like 'soda' and 'highway' (Vaux & Golder, 2003). But we focused on a more obscure term, one still closely intertwined with a foreign culture: 'boba', a milk tea of Taiwanese origin. By examining the wide variety of names for this niche drink as reported by those who enjoy it (and those who don't), we bring to light the complex connections of heritage, assimilation and linguistic change in American speech communities.

Background

The origins of this drink, as with many other phenomena in the modern age, are fairly obscure. Several cafés in Taiwan claim to have invented it in the 1980s (Zhang, 2019), but all that can be said definitively is that its original name, 波霸奶茶 *bo$_1$baa$_3$naai$_5$caa$_4$* ('large-ball milk tea'), hails from Cantonese (OED, 2020). The drink, a milky iced tea with chewy tapioca pearls, soon gained massive popularity in East Asia. By the turn of the century it had reached American consumers as well, specifically affluent urban youths in Asian-American neighborhoods (Rosen, 2017). They called it 'boba' or 'boba tea', a direct loan from Cantonese. In California, where the Asian diaspora is particularly strong, it became a symbol of cultural pride (Wei, 2017). From there a distinctive identity began to take root: something "unapologetically Asian," disconnected from both the White American experience and the lives of older first-generation immigrants (Zhang, 2019). It is this identity that lies at the heart of the complex language use surrounding boba.

Boba's popularity has exploded over the past decade (Rosen, 2017), bringing so-called boba culture from the West Coast to the East and beyond. But as the drink moves to new audiences and attains wider 'respectability,' the words for it have shifted. Many an anecdote asserts that drinkers on the East Coast prefer the more comfortably English term 'bubble tea' (Ost, 2015). Indeed, the New York Times used that name in its bemused coverage of the topic—and was additionally criticized for calling the pearls "blobs" (Pollock, 2017). And there are native Chinese speakers, whether visiting students or longtime inhabitants, who import new words of their own. 'Pearl milk tea' (a calque of the current Mandarin term 珍珠奶茶 *zhēnzhū nǎichá*), 'tapioca tea' and other variations are gaining in relevance (OED, 2020).

The result is a potent mix of locations and cultures, all visible at once in a young, quickly-changing linguistic landscape. Unlike more long-established words seen in dialect studies like those conducted by DARE and Harvard, boba offers a modern-day snapshot of high variation and language change as a response to cultural shifts. This makes it an ideal example of the deep relevance of lexical variation in defining speech communities. Young and old, East and West, American and Chinese: these interconnected identities, revealed by our survey of hundreds

of English speakers, are what lies at the root of boba's decades-long journey to the American mainstream.

Methods

Our study focuses on the lexical variation of several terms that we have encountered in conversation and in our background research. We focused on the terms 'boba', 'bubble tea', 'pearl milk tea', 'boba milk tea', 'boba tea', and 'tapioca tea', as they appeared most frequently in our background reading. We aim to show how usage of these terms varies based on social and demographic factors, and conducted an anonymous, online survey via Google Forms to gather data. The survey was advertised on our social media accounts, and spread to family members. Participants were encouraged to share the survey within their social circles as well. When writing the survey, we were careful to avoid naming the drink so as to not bias the participants towards the variants that we prefer. The survey text can be found in the Appendix below.

The demographic data collected includes age, English proficiency, nationality, and race. If participants indicated U.S. nationality, they were asked to select what they consider to be their home state. Similarly, participants with Chinese nationality were asked to select their home province. Respondents were then asked to rank on a scale of 1 to 5 how often they use the above terms, with 1 meaning 'never' and 5 meaning 'always'. There was an additional option for respondents to submit other terms they use that we did not include in our list. Finally, participants selected how often they drink the beverage, which we consider a useful measure of their 'involvement' in the loose speech community surrounding it.

Results

Over the span of 10 days, we received 208 responses detailing participants' demographic information and word choice. Through the help of social media, we were able to survey a wide audience, with respondents ranging in age from 18 to 75 years old. Since 72% of respondents were under age 24, we will limit our analysis to the 18-24 range, which mainly includes college students and recent graduates. This allows us to work with more representative data, as we have many respondents from this age group and can more safely draw conclusions surrounding their lexical variation. On a similar note, although we received responses from participants hailing from 20 countries, 79% are from the United States. We do not have enough data to analyze lexical variation outside of the United States, and so we will omit those responses from our analysis.

Age does not appear to play a significant role in determining lexical variation (Figure 1). Outside of the 18-24 age group, answers vary wildly which is mainly due to the low number of non-college aged respondents. Among 18-24 year olds, it is clear that they favor 'boba' and 'bubble tea' over other terms, although distinctions between these two popular names are not pronounced. However, there is a slight preference for 'boba' over 'bubble tea' for 18-21 year olds, which we will examine further in the Discussion.

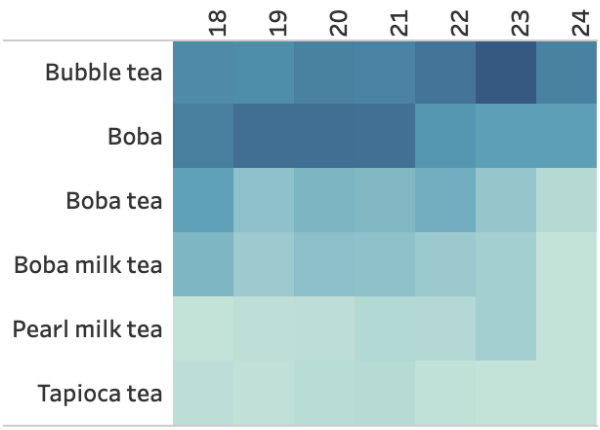

Figure 1. Relationship between age and lexical variation

The most salient demographic factor affecting word choice is geographic location (Figure 2). There is a divide between the West/Southwest and East/Midwest regions of the continental United States. In general, the West seems to use 'boba' more often than not, while the East prefers 'bubble tea'. Other terms that include the word 'boba', namely 'boba tea' and 'boba milk tea', show increased usage in states that prefer 'boba' although they are not as popular as the shortened phrase. There are no clear geographic trends for 'pearl milk tea' and 'tapioca tea', which are favored far less frequently than 'boba' and 'bubble tea'. We consider possible explanations for this divide and the implications in the Discussion. Despite the coastal divide, there were few participants who exclusively used one term. Even in (for instance) California, where the majority of respondents indicated that they almost always prefer 'boba', many indicated that they occasionally use 'bubble tea' as well.

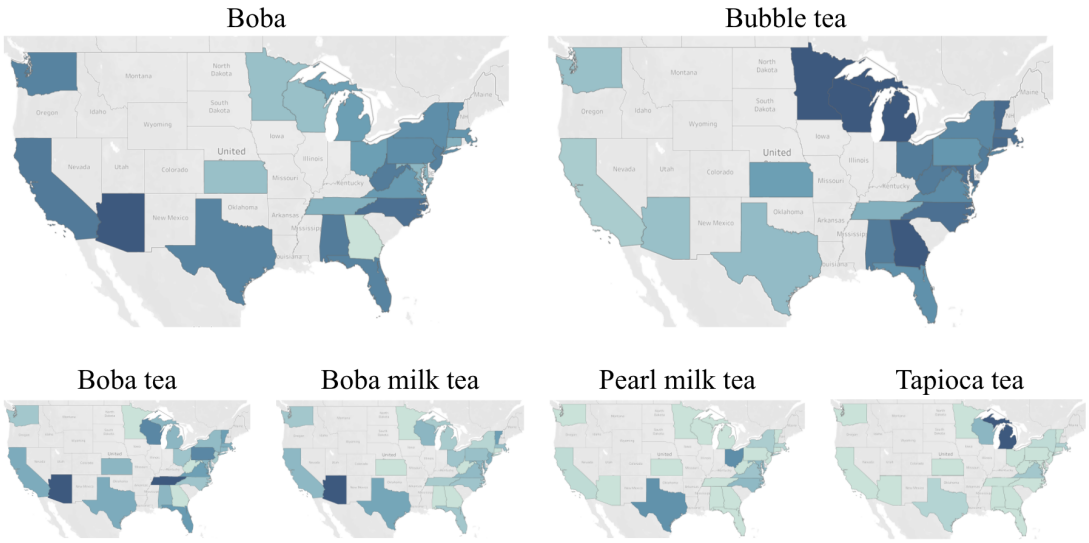

Figure 2. Geographic variation of each lexical item. Scales vary between the two rows

Unsurprisingly, race seems to have an effect on word choice as well (Figure 3). The vast majority of our respondents identify as either White or Asian, so we will compare trends between the two groups. Our results show a preference for 'boba' amongst Asian participants, and a

preference for ‘bubble tea’ amongst White participants. Asian participants also show more frequent use of ‘boba tea’, ‘boba milk tea’, and ‘pearl milk tea’, which are all loans or calques from Mandarin and Cantonese. However, the Asian preference for ‘boba’ is not as strong as we expected, with ‘bubble tea’ still a common choice.

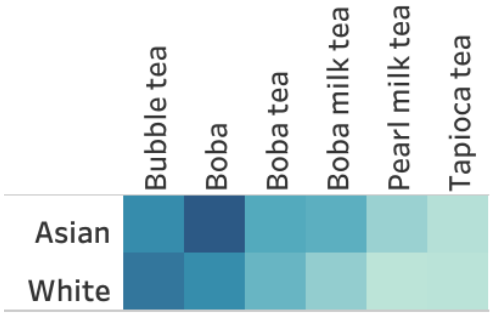

Figure 3. Relationship between race and lexical variation

Drink consumption frequency turned out to be an interesting factor (Figure 4). Participants who frequently drink boba strongly prefer ‘boba’ over any other terms. Those who self-identified with the highest frequency (once every few days) also use other terms containing the word ‘boba’, such as ‘boba tea’ and ‘boba milk tea’, with above-average frequency. Preference for ‘boba’ appears to trail off with a decrease in drink frequency, suggesting a correlation.

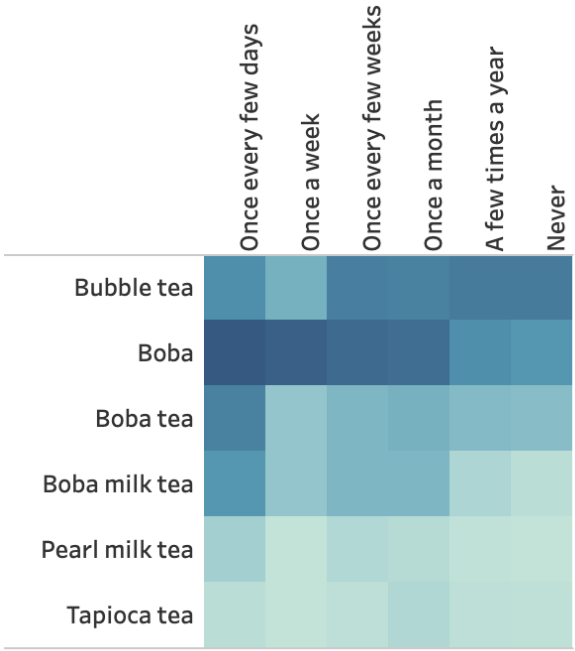

Figure 4. Relationship between drink frequency and lexical variation

Finally, our participants provided us with a few additional considerations. Ten respondents commented that they also use ‘milk tea’ to refer to the drink; while not strictly correct (as this term covers a wide variety of drinks), it is often sufficient in context. Some

respondents habitually use metonymy by substituting a particular shop name: for instance, "Wanna get UTea?" Others use 'boba' only or primarily to refer to the pearls. This distinction is especially relevant when placing specific orders at a café, as many boba shops also serve milk tea with other toppings; respondents noted that they might change their wording in other situations. Although the nuances of context are not easily capturable in a short survey, these comments remind us of its importance in any discussion of lexical variation.

Discussion

The results of our survey, while not conclusive on all fronts, illustrate the historical shifts and divides in terminology that were highlighted in the introduction. One anecdote corroborated by our survey is the geographic divide between 'bubble tea' and 'boba'. As previously discussed, the higher East Asian population on the West Coast is a probable factor in its preference for 'boba'; greater visibility and acceptance of Chinese words breeds greater usage of loanwords, even among those who do not themselves speak Chinese. This was likely the case for boba when its initial Asian-American adopters in the 1990s and 2000s began circulating it. Now that the so-called boba generation is grown, the term has deep roots. The Californian café chain Boba Guys, founded by two members of that generation, uses 'boba' exclusively (*Our Story*, 2020); its popularity in Los Angeles and the San Francisco Bay could contribute to the word's continued presence.

The East Coast's preference for 'bubble tea' does not have as clear-cut an explanation. It is possible that the relative lack of East Asian residents has allowed the Americanized term to gain popularity. This trend could also reflect a lighthearted rivalry between the coasts, with the lexical divergence being a way of differentiating between in-group and out-group members.

The idea of 'groups' is also important in our examination of race. The Asian lean towards 'boba' and the White lean towards 'bubble tea' is present but fairly weak, with both Asians and non-Asians often using other words as well. We attribute this to the recent rise of boba visibility and discussion in non-Asian communities, as well as the growth of Asian populations outside their 'heartlands' over the past several decades. Increased racial diversity and exposure to once-exotic cuisines have blurred the lines, allowing non-Asians to feel comfortable in their usage of loanwords. And conversely, Asians born after the initial wave of boba adoption who do not identify with the 'culture' may feel a decreased need to adhere to its original terminology. Asians who do not speak English natively or identify as Asian-American often have differing views on boba and boba culture, so they also may not consider themselves group members. The shifting definitions of group inclusion undoubtedly play a large role in the weakening ethnic trends seen in our results.

We now turn to drink consumption, where again we see the influence of group pressure. The appearance of any trend correlated with drink consumption suggests that there indeed exists a community of boba drinkers, with all the sociolinguistic baggage that entails—and that, since the frequent drinkers are of diverse racial makeup, it exists independently of ethnicity. The results indicate that frequent drinkers prefer 'boba': the original, more visibly Chinese name. Like any phenomenon that begins in obscurity before gradually achieving mainstream appeal (documented by Seay et al. (2004) in video-game communities, for instance), an in-group has coalesced around the perceived authentic roots of boba. Here this effect is closely intertwined with ethnicity even though the speakers themselves may not be; the performative use of a

Chinese loanword that is less easily understood by a non-community member signifies a speaker as 'in the know'. This highlights the speaker's group membership positively, in keeping with findings from social identity theory.

A final note: with the knowledge that our survey was distributed to our fellow classmates and friends via social media, it is fair to assume that a significant proportion of our responses come from Cornell students. In our personal experience, we have observed that Cornellians largely say 'boba', and many local cafés refer to it as such on their menus and advertisements. The increased preference for 'boba' that we see among 18-21 year olds may thus result from convergence due to social pressure. Although Cornellians come from around the world, students arriving at college strive to fit in with their peers and adhere to local norms. Thus, a student formerly accustomed to saying 'bubble tea' may find themselves using 'boba' more often in the (conscious or subconscious) hope of conforming to in-group norms perpetuated by other students, many of whom are Asian or Asian-American. Indeed, some of our participants noted in their responses that they only heard the term 'boba', and subsequently adopted it into their own vocabularies, after attending Cornell.

Conclusion

Jenny Zhang (2019) writes that the boba café is, for Asian-Americans (and now many others!), the quintessential example of sociologist Ray Oldenburg's 'third place': a casual gathering area separate from home and work where the community can meet and flourish (1999). And flourish it has. The culture that sprang from those early cafés—the Californian 'boba generation' and its multicolored descendants—is a microcosm of the intricacies of identity that characterize the American linguistic landscape. When we began our study of lexical variation in boba, we hoped to capture a few dimensions of that complexity as seen by the speakers who participate in it. While there is still a great deal to explore on the demographic front, the cultural divides we have seen are illustrative of boba's fascinating though short history in the U.S. What's in a name? For boba, as for anything else, it's much more than appearances suggest.

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