

*Gendered variation in a
matrilineal/matrilocal community:
Yongning Na of Yunnan, China*

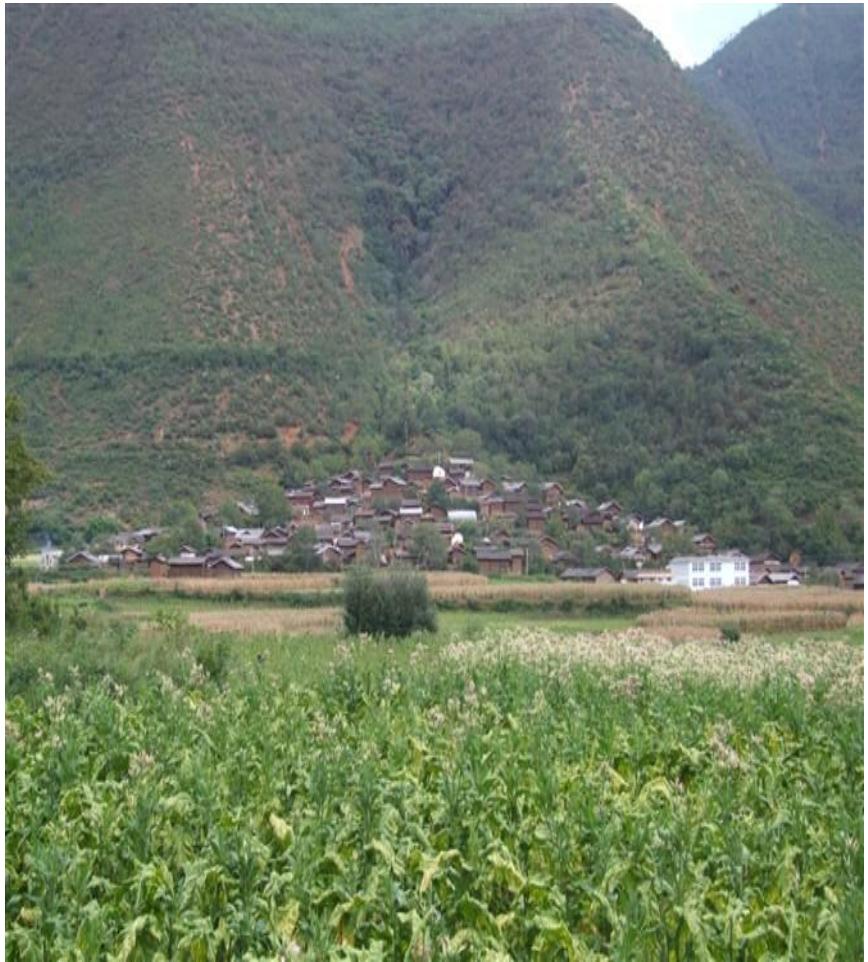
Jennifer Kuo

Cathryn Yang

James Stanford

Gender and sociolinguistics: Beyond traditional patriarchal societies

- Most modern sociolinguistic research on gender is based on traditionally patriarchal / patrilineal societies
- Little variation research in societies without traditional male-dominated gender patterns (Ochs & Schieffelin 1984; Hall 2002)
- Growing trend of including a greater range of society types (Meyerhoff 2019); gender research becoming more nuanced and inclusive (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 1992)



a Na village in Yunnan
province, southwest China

The Yongning Na of China:

Also known as Mosuo

Sino-Tibetan, Tibeto-Burman,
Burmo-Qiangic, Na-Qiangic,
Naic (Jacques & Michaud 2011)

Population: 47,000 (SIL 2010)



Map 1: Na area in Southwest China

Map 2: Location of Yongning



Fieldwork site: Assouwa



Fieldwork site: Walabje



Na society and culture



Na society and culture



- Traditionally matrilineal and matrilocal
- ***Tisese*** (zouhun, 走婚) ‘walking back and forth’ visiting system (Shih, 2010)
- Although *tisese* is practiced less now, both Walabje and Assouwa retain matrilineal family structures

A 'hybrid' form of walking marriage:

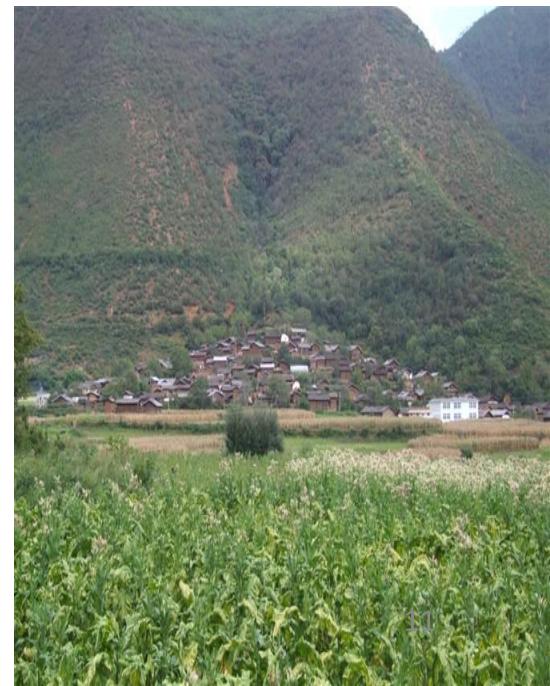


- Daughters stay in their maternal household
- Sons will either bring wife into their household, or move into their wife's household, depending on which household needs more helping hands.
- Child-raising is usually matrilocal

- Would Labov's classic principles play out differently in a society like Na – even in the opposite direction?
 - Would *men* use more standard forms than women (cf. Labov 2001; Trudgill 1974 *inter alia*)
 - Why or why not?
- What is the social meaning of gendered variation in such a society?
 - cf. Eckert 1988, 2011; Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 1992
 - Holmes & Meyerhoff (2003)



- Challenges and rewards of exploring language variation in different cultures and languages
- Depend more on cultural insiders
 - Mutually beneficial collaboration



Principle of Sociolinguistic Distance

—All things being equal, the more culturally and linguistically distant a society is from those we have already studied, the more likely it is to challenge our sociolinguistic assumptions and theoretical notions



Mansfield & Stanford 2017
(cf. Nick Evans "Wellsprings of Linguistic Diversity")

- Meyerhoff's *linguistic symphony*
 - Analysing variation while doing language documentation (2017)

Variables

- /β/ ~ φ
- /ɹ/ ~ φ
- fricative-vowel [v] as syllable nucleus vs. reduced.

Methods

- Identifying pictures
- Translating Chinese words into Na
- Freely narrating a wordless picture story



Methods

1. Auditory counts

2. Acoustic analysis

- Annotated in Praat TextGrids
- Praat script for extracting targeted variables
- Acoustic correlates:
 - Harmonics-to-noise (HNR) for the fricative vowel
 - Duration for the uvular and rhotic variable

HNR as a measure of frication in [v]

- Tested HNR on 10 tokens that were judged as pure vowels versus 10 tokens judged as strongly fricated
- Significant correlation.

Results

Auditory results

- /β/ ~ Ø (344 tokens)
 - Deleted more frequently in free speech than in word-list style ($p<0.0001$)
 - Deleted more frequently by women than men ($p=0.0023$, Rbruil Johnson 2009)
- /ɹ/ ~ Ø (551 tokens)
 - Deleted more frequently in free speech ($p<0.0001$)
 - Deleted more frequently by women than men ($p=0.0014$)
- Fricative-vowel [v] as syllable nucleus (2,425 tokens)
 - Reduced less frequently in free speech ($p<0.0001$)
 - Reduced more frequently by women ($p<0.0001$)

Acoustic results

Fricative vowel [v]

- Walabje result (16 women, 13 men)
 - Women avg HNR: 13.95
 - Men avg HNR: 8.49
 - Significant gender difference ($p<0.0001$, paired t-test)
- Assouwa result (23 men, 21 men)
 - Women avg HNR: 11.37
 - Men avg HNR: 7.03
 - Gender difference ($p<0.0001$, paired t-test)

Acoustic results: uvular fric. /ʁ/

Factors:

- style: wordlist (76) vs. story (34)
- location: Assouwa (19) vs. Walabje (57)
- Gender: 51F, 37M
- Birth Year: 1932~2004 (median=1976)

DV: ʁ duration

- comparable results for rime duration (and for normed duration)
- shorter duration → more reduced

Acoustic results: uvular fric. /β/

No significant effect of gender

Sig. predictors of R duration:

- Shorter duration in free speech (story) ($p<0.0001$)
- Shorter duration in Walabje ($p<0.0001$)

style	mean dur (ms)
wordlist	18.5
story	4.4

Location	mean dur (ms)
Assouwa	36.3
Walabje	9.6

Acoustic results for [ɿ]

Factors:

- word (“book” [tʰæɿ] vs. “seed” [ɿæ])
- style: wordlist (67) vs. story (33)
- location: Assouwa (9) vs. Walabje (88)
- Sex: 62F, 35M
- Birth Year: 1932~2004 (median=1975)

DV: [ɿ] duration

- comparable results for [ɿ] duration (and for normed duration)
- shorter duration → more reduced

Acoustic results for [ɥ]

No significant effect of **gender**

- **Birth Year.** Shorter duration in younger speakers ($p<0.001$)
- **Location.** Shorter duration in Walabje ($p<0.0001$)
- **Style.** shorter duration in free speech ($p < 0.0001$)

Birth year	Coeff.
+1	-1.009

Location	mean dur (ms)
Assouwa	317.8
Walabje	235.2

Style	mean dur (ms)
wordlist	295.2
story	162.4

Interim summary: acoustic results

- Effect of speech style, consistent with auditory results.
- Gender effects trend in the right direction, but are non-significant in acoustic results for [ɹ] and /β/ →
 - Next step: try other acoustic measures, and more carefully test whether these variables present a case of gendered variation.

Overall summary of our Na results

- Matrilineal society, unlike most prior sociolinguistic studies
- Phonetic reductions in free speech in most variables
- Na women more likely to reduce than men (significant trend in auditory results)

Overall summary of our Na results

- "Mumbling is macho"?
 - Heffernan (2010) reviews studies of gendered phonological reduction, along with his own work on masculinity, concluding that "mumbling is macho."
 - Apparently, that is not the case for Na, and instead it is the women who are "mumbling" (using reduced forms) more than the men.
- Different local experience of gender and symbolic capital (Eckert 1993, Bucholtz 2002, Zimman 2017)

Discussion

- Free speech is the speech style where Na speakers are most likely to use reduced or zero variants, as expected for phonologically reduced forms
- Intriguingly, based on auditory results, women were more likely to produce these reduced forms than the men
- Unlike most studies in traditionally patriarchal societies where men are more likely to use phonologically reduced forms, and where Principle I is typically upheld.

Discussion

- Sociolinguists are well aware that speakers construct and draw upon a wide range of localized expectations for gendered linguistic behavior (Bucholtz 2002; Zimman 2017)
- Perhaps the difference here can be explained by understanding Na matrilineal social practices
 - Na women are held in esteem in these local social practices
 - Contrary to the situation in sociolinguistic research of traditionally patriarchal societies

Discussion

- Symbolic capital (Eckert 1993)
 - Na women's speech choices are reflecting and constructing their relatively higher social status
 - Perhaps they do not need to focus on symbolic capital as much as in traditionally patriarchal societies.

Standard Language Ideology

- The Na results also pose a challenge for the classic Labovian gendered principles that refer to a standard or prestige variant
- Na ethnographic interviews: Speakers did not consider any particular native Na pronunciation to be more standard or "better"
- Nagy (2009): Many language communities around the world do not have "agreed-on norms" (cf. Kasstan 2019).
- Our Na results suggest that in societies without such norms, the sociolinguistic experience of gender may emerge in localized ways that differ considerably from prior work

Future steps

Two more languages in matrilineal/matriarchal societies:

Lahu in Nanduo Village, Yunnan:

31 speakers

Lahu in Zhanmapo Village, Yunnan:

31 speakers

Tai Lue in Nakham Village, Northern Laos:

30 speakers

Acknowledgments

- Thank you to the Na community members who kindly participated in this project, including He Linfu and Yang Caihua
- Thank you to student research assistants Victoria Xu, Josh Vogel, Abbie Schaefer, Rine Uhm, Jack Wagner, Angela Burns, Craig Wilcox
- This project was partially supported by a Dartmouth College Dean of the Faculty Grant for Scholarly Innovation and Advancement and a Dartmouth Post-Baccalaureate Fellowship

Selected References

- Bucholtz, M. 2002. From 'sex differences' to gender variation in sociolinguistics. *University of Pennsylvania Working Papers in Linguistics* 8(2):33-45. Papers from NNAV-30.
- Conrod, Kirby. 2019. *Pronouns raising and emerging*. PhD dissertation, University of Washington.
- Eckert, Penelope and Sally McConnell-Ginet. 1992. Think practically and look locally: Language and gender as community-based practice. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 21:461-90.
- Evans, Nicholas. 2014-2019. Wellsprings of Linguistic Diversity. Australian National University.
- Heffernan, Kevin. 2010. Mumbling is macho: Phonetic distinctiveness in the speech of American radio DJs. *American Speech* 85: 67-90.
- Labov, William. 1972. *Sociolinguistic Patterns*. Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania.
- Labov, William. 2001. *Principles of Linguistic Change, Vol. 2: Social Factors*. Malden, MA/Oxford: Wiley.
- Mansfield, John & James Stanford (2017). Documenting sociolinguistic variation in indigenous communities: Practical methods and solutions. *Language Documentation and Conservation*, Special Publication No. 13, pp. 116-36 (Hildebrandt, Jany, Silva eds).
- Meyerhoff, Miriam. 2017. Writing a linguistic symphony: Analysing variation while doing language documentation. *Canadian Journal of Linguistics* 62(4): 525-549.
- Meyerhoff, Miriam. 2019. Unnatural bedfellows? The sociolinguistic analysis of variation and language documentation *Journal of the Royal Society of New Zealand* 49:229-41.
- Michaud, Alexis. 2018. *Na (Mosuo)-English-Chinese dictionary, version 1.2. 2018*. halshs-01204638v3
- Nagy, Naomi, and Miriam Meyerhoff. 2008. The social lives of language. In Miriam Meyerhoff and Naomi Nagy (eds), *Social lives in language – Sociolinguistics and multilingual speech communities: Celebrating the work of Gillian Sankoff*. Amsterdam: Benjamins. 1-17.
- Trudgill, Peter. 1974. The social differentiation of English in Norwich. Cambridge: CUP..
- Zimman, Lal. 2017. Gender as stylistic bricolage: Transmasculine voices and the relationship between