

“Where are you really from”:
Identity and racial otherness in narratives by Asian Americans

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Research questions

- How are the narrators positioned as racial others in their experiences?
- What does the term “racial others” mean in the narratives?
- How do narrators give voices to different characters in the story world?
- What are the functions of direct reported speech?

Data

- 7 sociolinguistic interviews (2 examples are presented here)
- Interviewees: 1.5th or 2nd generation Asian Americans from California
- Interview topics: study, work, hobbies, foods, social network, daily routine, family, friends, identity, etc.
- Interviewer: myself (Chinese)

Analytical tools

- Racial othering
 - Otherness is defined as a category assigned by a more powerful group (Mullin-Jackson, 2009)
 - Kim’s (1999) racial triangulation
 - Asian Americans: “foreigners”
 - White Americans: “insiders”
- Positioning
 - The discursive process where selves are located in interaction(Davies and Harré, 1990; van Langenhove and Harré, 1999)
- Presupposition and implicature
- Category-bound activities
 - Activities done by members of particular categories (Sacks, 1972)
- Direct reported speech
 - The recordings of narratives were digitalized in Praat for the analysis of pitch

Asian Americans as “illegitimate Americans”

Kevin: Chinese American born and raised in Berkeley, California

- Example 1**
1. Kevin:

This happens to me like, a lot,
2. Sabrina:

[Mhm]
3. Kevin:

[so,] like,
4.

<laughing>especially at the Bay.>
5.

It’s so funny [like,]
6. Sabrina:

[Mhm]
7. Kevin:

so like I sit down with someone,
8.

who is white, right?
9. Sabrina:

[Mhm]
10. Kevin:

[And] they will be like,
11.

“Oh, where are you from?”
12.

I say, “Oh, I’m from Berkeley.”
13.

[Right?]
14. Sabrina:

[Mhm]
15. Kevin:

Because that’s where I’m from, right?
16.

[I’m not from San Francisco,] right?
17. Sabrina:

[Mhm]
18. Kevin:

And they’re like,
19.

“No, no, where are you really from?”
20.

[You know?]
21. Sabrina:

[Oh, really.]
22. Kevin:

And then, I say,
23.

“Oh, well, my parents are from China.”
24. Sabrina:

Mhm.
25. Kevin:

Uh, and, then, that satisfies them.

“No, no, where are you really from?”

↓ presuppose

Kevin, as a non-white person, must “be from” a country
other than the U.S.

↓ position

Kevin: “illegitimate American”

Line	Character	Utterance	Pitch mean(Hz)
11	Other	Oh, where are you from?*	184.076
12	Kevin	Oh, I’m from Berkeley.	135.047
19	Other	No, no, where are you really from?*	128.648
23	Kevin	Oh, well, my parents are from China.	260.178

(* no rising at the end of the sentence)

Hockey as a racially marked sport

Jason: Korean American born and raised in the Orange County, California

- Example 2**
1. Jason:

I-I used to <laughing>play,> um,
2.

I used to- when I was younger, I used to play like, uh ice hockey?
3. Sabrina:

Hm.
4. Jason:

So actually that was kind of an interesting thing like-
5.

‘cause Asians don’t play hockey, right?
6. Sabrina:

Mm, [yeah yeah right.]
7. Jason:

[And so-] so I think like part of it was just like the- the street I grew up on,
8.

like all the kids play hockey,
9.

so I just play hockey.
10.

Like in the, like early nineties,
11.

like hockey was very popular, in Southern California.
12. Sabrina:

Oh, cool.
13. Jason:

Um, and,
14.

but, like it was
15.

it’s- it was a strange thing for me like um — like-
16.

‘cause like uh,
17.

the other Asian kids,
18.

they don’t play hockey.
19.

So they kind of make fun of me,
20. Sabrina:

[<laughs>]
21. Jason:

[like] “Oh, you- you’re such a white- white-person sport.”

“Oh, you-you’re such a white- white person sport”

↓ implicate

a mismatch between Jason’s ethnicity and the activity playing hockey
(playing hockey is a category-bound activity)

↓ position

Jason: “outside the mainstream population”

Line	Character	Utterance	Pitch mean (Hz)
19	Jason	So they kind of make fun of me	116.792
21	Other	Oh, you- you’re such a white- white-person sport.	221.875

Conclusions

- Asian Americans are positioned through pragmatic process (**presupposition and implicature**) and the use of **membership categorization**.
- Asian Americans are positioned as “**illegitimate Americans**”, “**foreigners**”, “**outside the mainstream population.**”
- Narrators vary their pitch to give different voices to the characters in the story world. **The pitch values for voicing others are generally higher** than the ones for selves, which provides a sharp contrast between these two groups—white Americans as “insiders” and Asian Americans as “foreigners.”

References

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