Towards an understanding of Asian American ethnolects: Sociophonetic data from Bostonians

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Ethnolect: a language variety typically associated with a particular ethnic group (Wardhaugh & Fuller, 2014)

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One population that has not been investigated systematically at the ethnolectal level is the Asian American community.

Present Study

Goal: to investigate the extent to which individual Asian Americans (i.e. citizens and/or residents of the United States that are of Asian descent) residing in the Boston area share norms for selected linguistic features

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- New England English
  - R-Deletion
  - Low Back Raising
- Asian American English
  - L-Vocalization
  - L/R-Conflation

** I am using the term "Asian American English" although the present study aims to determine the existence of this very ethnolect

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R-Deletion

Process by which speakers delete /ɹ/ in coda position (e.g. /kɑɹt/ ‘cart’ becoming [kɑt])

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- Minority populations produce the feature (Browne & Stanford, 2018)
- Younger generations deleting at significantly lower rates (Stanford, 2019)

Low Back Raising

Process by which speakers variably raise /ɑ/ up to /ɔ/ (e.g. /ɑntɹeɪ/ 'entree' becoming [ɔntɹeɪ])

- Can be traced back to the 1930s (Nagy et al., 2008)

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- Can be traced back to the 1930s (Nagy et al., 2008)
- Production of low back vowels found to correlate with ethnic and regional identity (Wong & Hall-Lew, 2014)

L-Vocalization

Process by which speakers vocalize /l/ in coda position (e.g. /ɹil/ 'real' becoming [ɹiw])

- Mentioned in perceptual accounts of Asian Americans' production of English (Newman & Wu, 2011)

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- Feature found in majority and minority populations (Ash, 1982; Durian, 2008; Hall-Lew & Starr, 2010)
- Third- and fourth-generation Chinese Americans produce vocalized /l/ (Hall-Lew & Starr, 2010)

L/R-Conflation

Process by which speakers do not disambiguate between /l/ and /ɹ/ (e.g. /lɛmən/ 'lemon' becoming [ɹɛmən])

- Largely reported in perception studies on Asian Americans' speech production (Newman & Wu, 2011; Bauman, 2013; Watanabe, 2017)

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- L2 studies on Japanese learners of English (**???**)

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Research Questions:

- Do Asian Americans living in Boston produce features associated with the New England dialect?

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- Do Asian Americans living in Boston produce features associated with the New England dialect?
- Regardless of their specific language backgrounds, do Asian Americans living in Boston produce features associated with perceptual accounts of Asian American speech?

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- 100 tokens per participant per feature (800 total tokens per feature)

Participants

Eight participants:

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Participant	Group	Sex	Age	Arrival Age	Yrs in Boston	% Eng Use
CFL	Chinese	F	21	18	3	7%
CMH	Chinese	M	22	0	22	97%
KFH	Korean	F	20	18	2	95%
KML	Korean	M	26	22	4	45%
FFH	Filipino	F	24	0	24	100%
FML	Filipino	M	23	18	5	80%
VFL	Vietnamese	F	21	18	3	5%
VFH	Vietnamese	F	28	6	22	70%

Participant labels indicate each participant's heritage group, sex, and percent English use.

Variables I

- R-Deletion
  - Tokens of coda /ɹ/
  - Perceptually coded: "present" or "absent"
  - Independent variables: following sound, socioeconomic status, ethnicity

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  - Perceptually coded: "present" or "absent"
  - Independent variables: following sound, socioeconomic status, ethnicity
- Low Back Raising
  - Tokens of /ɔ/ and /ɑ/
  - Acoustically coded: F1 and F2 frequencies
  - Independent variables: preceding sound, following sound, ethnicity

Variables II

- L-Vocalization
  - Tokens of coda /l/
  - Perceptually coded: "definitely consonantal", "some vocalization but more consonantal", "more vocalized than consonantal", or "definitely vocalized" (Hall-Lew & Fix, 2012)
  - Independent variables: stress, ethnicity

Variables II

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  - Independent variables: stress, ethnicity
- L/R-Conflation
  - Tokens of onset /l/ & /ɹ/
  - Perceptually coded: "conflated" or "not conflated"
  - Independent variables: preceding and following sound

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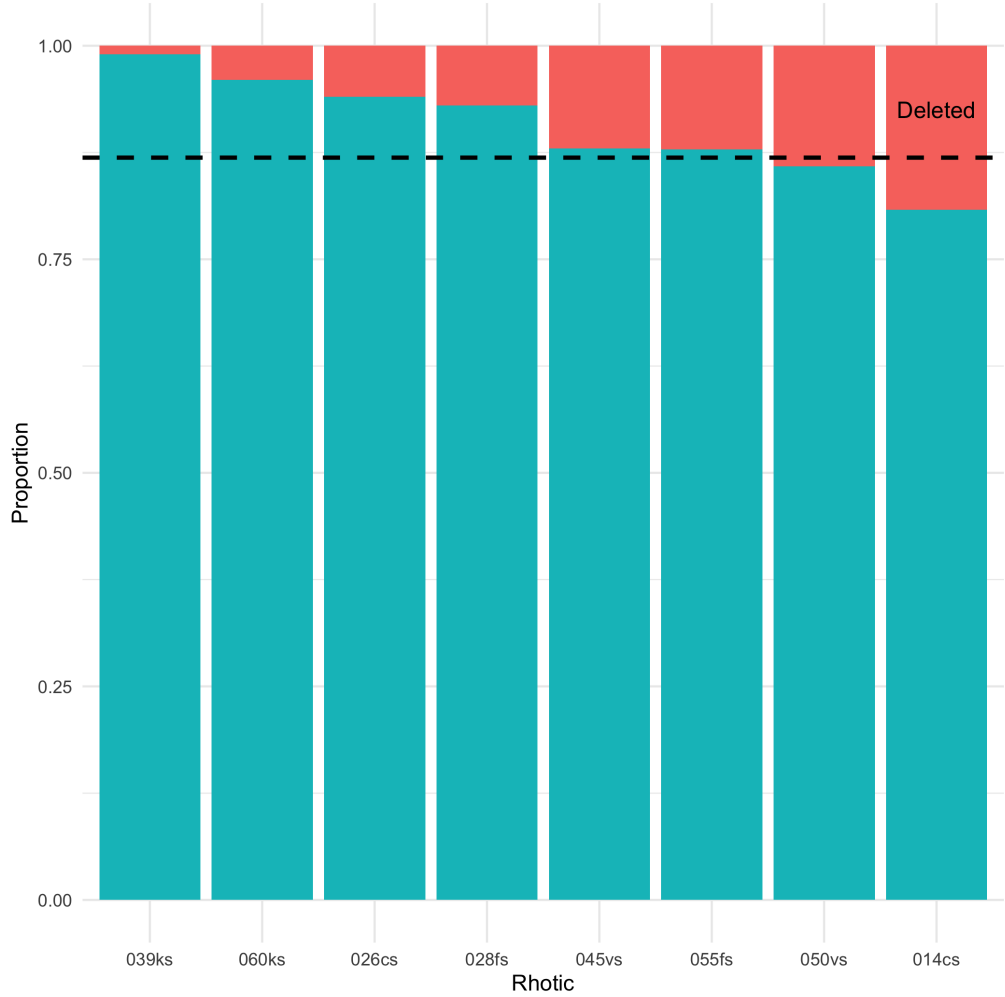
R-Deletion

- Following sound not a significant predictor
- Below middle class *more* likely to produce /ɹ/
- Chinese and Filipino participants significantly less likely to produce /ɹ/
- Korean participants significantly more likely to produce /ɹ/



Low Back Raising

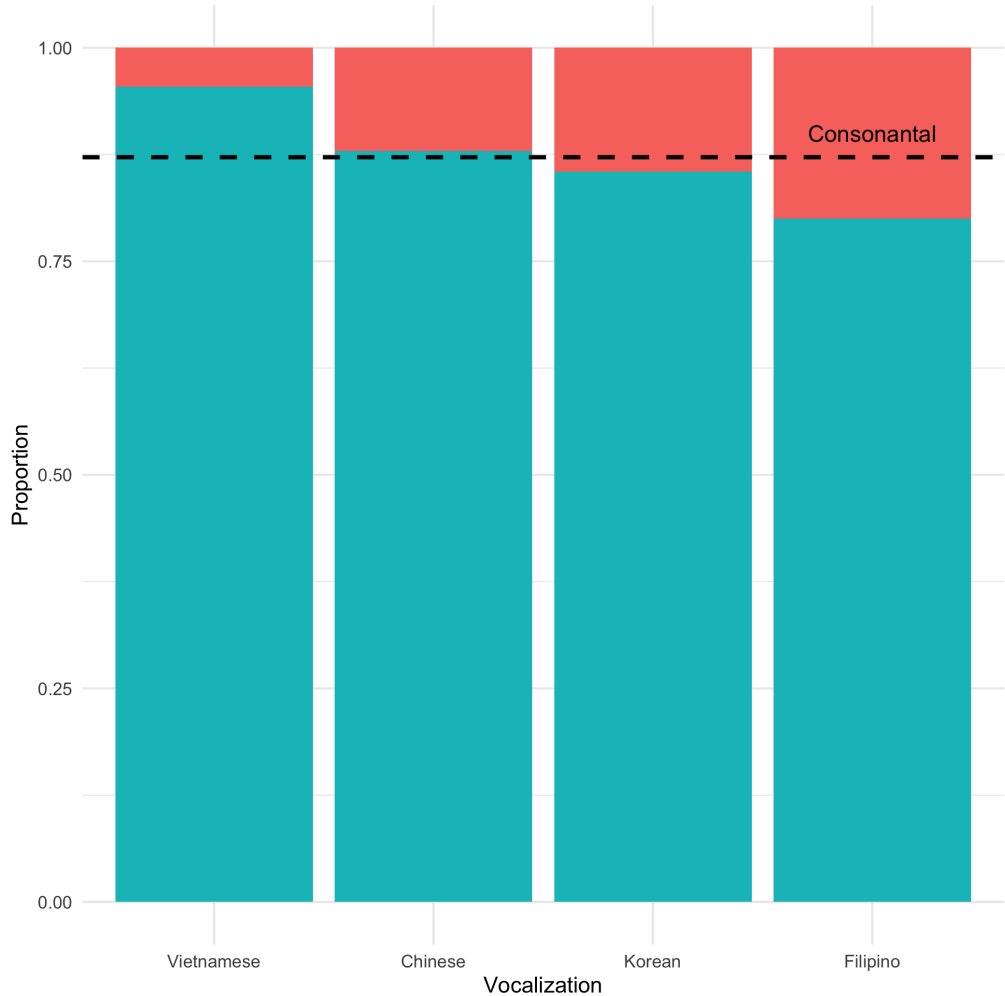
- Vowel type significant predictor in individual F1 and F2 models
- Ethnicity not a significant predictor

Low Back Raising

- Vowel type significant predictor in individual F1 and F2 models
- Ethnicity not a significant predictor
- Following sound significant predictor for F1 and F2
  - F1 and F2 significantly lower when followed by a lateral
  - F2 significantly higher when followed by a nasal

L-Vocalization

- Preceding vowel and stress not significant predictors
- Filipino participants vocalized /l/ significantly less than the overall mean



L/R-Conflation

Zero participants conflated /l/ or /ɹ/ in onset position.

Certain participants utilized different techniques when producing liquids

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- Asian Americans not deleting /ɹ/ at a rate comparable to Caucasian Bostonians or African American Bostonians (Browne & Stanford, 2018; Stanford, 2019)

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- Socioeconomic status significant in the *opposite* direction of previous literature (Stanford, 2019; Nagy & Irwin, 2010; Irwin & Nagy, 2007)

R-Deletion

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- Socioeconomic status significant in the *opposite* direction of previous literature (Stanford, 2019; Nagy & Irwin, 2010; Irwin & Nagy, 2007)
- Present study did not consider speech rate (Irwin & Nagy, 2007)

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Low Back Raising

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- Generally more conservative in production of salient/stigmatized New England features
- Effects of liquids and nasals on F1 and F2 consistent with previous research (**??**)

L-Vocalization

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- High rates of L-Vocalization could be attributed to the widespread nature of the feature
- Significantly higher rates of vocalization by Filipino participants could be due to their socioeconomic status
  - Both participants self reported as below middle class
  - Would be consistent with previous findings (Ash, 1982; Durian, 2008)

L/R-Conflation

- Results suggest Asian Americans hyperaware of stigmatized/stereotypical feature
  - Participants CFL & VFL self-reported percent of English use less than 10%
- One participant vocalizes /ɹ/ in certain contexts (e.g. /ɹ/ in 'require' produced as [w])

L/R-Conflation

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  - Participants CFL & VFL self-reported percent of English use less than 10%
- One participant vocalizes /ɹ/ in certain contexts (e.g. /ɹ/ in 'require' produced as [w])
- Future research on L/R-Conflation should investigate liquids in multiple positions

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- Participants do not produce features associated with New England
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Future research:

- Increased participants
- Collect empirical data on language attitudes

Thank you!

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