

Recently, Bucholtz and Hall (2004a, 2004b) developed a theoretical model for investigating the relationship between language and identity. Building on a broad variety of previous research on language and identity, this framework emphasizes the dynamic, emergent and intersubjective nature of identity and privileges the role of the interaction in its construction. The model presents a sociocultural linguistic approach to identities.

In this paper, I adopt the ideas behind this innovative approach for an examination of how speakers – specifically, self-identified bilingual Chinese Americans from the San Francisco Bay Area – display ethnic identity in sociolinguistic interviews. Previous work by Schilling-Estes (2004), Zilles and King (2005), and Dubois, Noetzel and Salmon (2005) has found such situations to be revealing sources of the performance of identity and the projection of personae.

For this study, I use an interactional analysis to examine the motivations behind several instances of Chinese language mixing in otherwise English interactions. These cases retain the original Chinese (either Mandarin or Cantonese) pronunciations, are not integrated into American English phonology, and are often accompanied by explanations or translations. Additionally, these cases occur after the interviewer had indicated that she is ethnically part Chinese and a speaker of Chinese. Finally, they are typically used for specifically Chinese cultural terminology, personal and place names, and performance (as seen in (1):

(1)

DENNIS: But I, I do think that there, there is a, transmission of, certain values just growing up in a Chinese American or Chinese household. I remember one, one concept was this whole, the whole thing of, it's called teng1 gaau3 I guess. But in Mandarin it'd be ting1 jiao4, you know, listening to what you're taught, kind of.

Although labeling these practices is difficult, their characteristics indicate that they are not borrowings (Haugen 1953; Poplack, Sankoff and Miller 1988). Rather, I suggest that these instances of Chinese, whether we call them code-switches or insertions (Muysken 2000), are a way for speakers to display their affiliation with, and portray themselves as experts of, Chinese identity and Chinese-ness – or, emphasizing their interactional and performative nature, a way of doing being Chinese. This study thus provides evidence of how identity is co-constructed and emergent even in this seemingly artificial setting. Furthermore, it raises interesting questions about the influence of the researcher in the sociolinguistic interview.

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