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Language and Ethnic Belonging: Identity by Way of Language

Sammy Wu

Abstract

Language and ethnic belonging are topics that intertwine with one another. 1.5 and second generation Asian Americans experience a struggle in the maintenance of their ethnic language as they navigate the USA with the English language. This paper examines this relationship by investigating how language proficiency impacts an individual's degree of ethnic belonging within the Asian American experience. This investigation utilizes the narratives of eight 1.5 and second generation Asian Americans. Drawing from these narratives, proficiency in the ethnic language can impact ethnic belonging via personal identification, coethnic acceptance, and cultural connection.

Introduction: Language and My Journey

Language and ethnic belonging is a discussion in my community that is both shared and personal. We have similar plot points: our heritage languages being our first language, a language shift to English when we entered an English-based education system, participation in a respective heritage language school or course, and a language barrier between ourselves and our family, specifically our parents. Language was something we took for granted, being a consistent tool that has allowed people to communicate with one another. However, being an ethnic minority and an individual who is not a part of their heritage language's host society, language has an impact that goes beyond communication—it is a facet of connection, specifically, a connection with the ethnic community. Our conversations and narratives about language have always ended with conflicted feelings surrounding our cultural and ethnic identity. The connotations used that coincide with the concept of language mold the heritage language to be analogous to a membership card—a way to justify belonging and ethnic

acceptance. As central as language is to a community, it is even more apparent in the household. I hope to understand how language allows ethnic acceptance and belonging by way of the family, as language often introduces the issues of language barriers, familial conflicts, and familial connectedness. This shared experience has motivated me to investigate the narratives of second-generation Asian Americans on how language and language fluency play roles in ethnic belonging, and whether that belonging is gatekept externally by our coethnics or internally by ourselves.

Literature Review: The Generational Retention of Language

In the immigrant experience in the context of America, there are polar thoughts revolving around language. There are immigrants who want their children to speak their heritage or native language in order to maintain a semblance of their roots and culture; for others, there is discouragement in learning the heritage language in order to have quicker access to success and social mobility. There may also be internalized feelings of rejection from one's own ethnic culture in order to assimilate into the dominant English and American society; this is often manifested by dissociating or refusing to learn the native language. Regardless of how present or absent the heritage language is in one's own life, in order to have a discussion about language and ethnic belonging, it is, as Fishman (2017) asserts, important to recognize that "language is the prime indicator and expression of their own and another's ethnicity [, and it is] being experienced as vital and as a basis for social organization and mobilization" regardless of how marginal and optional it may be in the lives of individuals (p. 330). Language is never completely absent in the lives of ethnic individuals; it is present to some degree and will have an impact in some facets of life: family, identity, and community. The presence of language and ethnicity does not always have to be visible in day-to-day life; it is implemented subconsciously.

However, within the process of assimilation, they intensify and become more apparent when there is a competition between the heritage language and the dominant language of the host society, which is English in this context. It results in the “weakening of traditional life in the face of cultural influence [, and] on the other hand, a protective and differentiating counteraction is often cultivated” in order to maintain the native language or ethnic culture (Fishman, 2017, p.330).

The retention of the heritage language across generations can be outlined by Portes and Hao (2002) as a “three-generation process: first-generation immigrants speak their languages at home and learn English as far as possible to communicate in their workplaces; their children learn fluent English but continue to communicate with their parents in their mother tongue; by the third generation, English generally becomes the home language and any residual knowledge of other tongues disappears” (p. 890). This outline portrays the trend and progress of assimilation as an immigrant family settles themselves into a new host society. It is pertinent to note that these outlines show the progression and regression of two languages: as the immigrant family generationally progresses, English becomes the dominant language of the descendants while the heritage language becomes less spoken. Typically within an immigrant family, a baby’s first language is the heritage language, the language that the immigrant parents speak daily. As the child grows older they experience, as their parents did immigrate, the push and pull of language maintenance and language shift. This shift can be seen when the second generation child enters the American academic setting, an area where English becomes the primary language. Now, the second generation must navigate and negotiate which language to utilize in accordance with different spheres of their lives, their ethnic community, and the world outside of that space.

Distinct from language acquisition, which is the attainment of a language, language maintenance is “the continuing use of a language in the face of competition from a regionally and socially powerful or numerically stronger language”. The trend is the opposite of a language shift, the “change from the habitual use of one’s minority language to that of a more dominant language under pressures of assimilation from the dominant group”(Zhang, 2010, p. 43). Even if the baby’s first language is the heritage language, the three-generation process outlines a language shift from the heritage language to the dominant language. This domination of the English language can be seen as the ethnic minority conforming to the host society, adopting its norms in order to assimilate. This domination of the English language can be exemplified by how critical it is in the livelihood of the immigrant family. Not only will the family unit negotiate when to utilize the ethnic language and English, but they will also be forced to prioritize English in order to navigate the host society. My second-generation interviewees shared similar experiences of having to translate important documents and information for their non-fluent English speakers, creating an understanding of how crucial it is to prioritize the host society’s dominant language.

As the youth of immigrant families conform more to the dominant society, they have the potential to become ethnically ambivalent. Ethnic ambivalence is the lack of interest in ethnicity and is described to be a stage “of active distancing from or rejection of the ethnic culture, while preference is shown for the dominant culture and attempts are made to join that group” (Tse, 2000, p. 187). Although English language proficiency can be seen as a sign of achievement by immigrant families, it is also accompanied by a reluctance towards speaking or associating with the heritage language. This can create consequences and divides within families; having a reluctance to learn or speak the heritage language can create language

barriers in the household cultivating familial conflict and potentiality for familial disconnectedness. Portes and Hao (2002) warn that “a loss of the parental language entails growing estrangement from the cultural ways of the first generation and often a condescending or disrespectful attitude towards them. Accordingly, lesser family solidarity and greater conflict with parents may be expected” (p. 892).

Research Methods and Interviewees

In investigating how language relates to ethnic belonging, I interviewed a total of eight Asian Americans that identify as either 1.5 or second generation. Their ages ranged from nineteen to twenty years old. Of the eight interviewees, whose names have been changed for the purposes of confidentiality, three identified as fluent or proficient speakers of their native language: Eric, a Japanese American man, Delilah, a Vietnamese American woman, and Conway, a Vietnamese American man. The other 5 interviewees did not identify themselves as fluent speakers of their heritage language: Edna, a Vietnamese American woman, Rebecca, a Chinese American woman, John, a Chinese American man, Michelle, a Korean American woman, and Friendship, a Vietnamese American man. The narratives of these eight interviewees allowed me to investigate how the presence or absence of language impacted their ethnic and familial identities, and their diverse stories shared themes that, I hope, other Asian Americans can relate to in some modicum.

The methodology behind my interview questions was to first ask how connected they were to their families and then to their ethnic identity. I then continued to probe this connectedness with questions surrounding their language maintenance and shift in and outside the household. The interview questions not only inquired about fluency, but also about their relationships and comfortability, whether that be speaking in spaces or with

coethnics in order to gain perspective about both external and internalized ethnic belonging.

Conversational: Sad, Broken, Gone

The language that surrounds the narratives of the non-fluent speakers had negative connotations; the words they used to describe their ethnic language proficiency, which has occurred frequently in each separate interview, were: conversational, sad, broken, gone, and nonexistent. While these interviewees can speak their heritage language to some extent, they noticeably lacked confidence in their proficiency and reliability. Friendship shared a sentiment that I believe many of my nonfluent interviewees would resonate with: “If I was stranded in Vietnam, in the middle of nowhere, I would cry; I would only be able to beg for basic needs, but not complex things.” Like many of the interviewees, Friendship described himself as knowing only a few words and phrases that he uses in his daily life while being incapable of “coherent elegant sentence structure”. In his eyes, fluency was defined by “being able to speak full sentences without stuttering, a sort of an elegance in the voice that sounds [like they are] fluent. If they’re not fluent, they sound choppy; there’s a flow to it like the word “fluency”. I sound like a dead horse.” Friendship did not attend any formal language courses, and his “broken words” were picked up at home in order to communicate with his mother.

These broken words can be seen as the remnants of the competition between language maintenance and language shifts in the second generation. Edna, on the other hand, did attend a more formal setting to learn Vietnamese. However, she did not find the learning process fruitful. “I speak conversational Vietnamese. Sometimes I can’t say things; it just comes out as a mess. I can say ‘hi’, ‘what are you doing’, and order food – the basics. Some terms, you forget how to say.” Edna was unable to retain what she learned in her course but was able to remember words she learned in her household. They were words she spoke consistently and practically. She, as

well as other interviewees, shared the sentiment that to learn one's heritage language is through exposure and practice, not that of a formal setting.

Although Edna states that she retained a better memory of the ethnic language taught in the household as opposed to a formal academic setting, she also reveals that she has lost her language fluency. "I regret not speaking [more] at home; it's what helped reinforce Vietnamese for me." By not engaging in the environment where she was exposed to Vietnamese, Edna no longer retained the same proficiency she had with Vietnamese. By not engaging and speaking with her ethnic community, her family, she was unable to practice and retain being fluent in Vietnamese.

Rebecca shares Edna's preference for exposure learning. Although she describes her fluency to be broken or gone, being unable to have a normal conversation without hesitating, she feels "comfortable speaking in Chinatown because there are things I [she] can say in Canto that are normally said there and I [she] can repeat them." Having grown up helping her parents' store in Chinatown, Rebecca finds herself conversing with customers and the community in Cantonese. Chinatown became a place of exposure and practice. A majority of her customers were Chinese-speaking individuals, requiring her to speak the language in order to engage with them. She has gone through some formal language courses and found them to be unbeneficial. "I feel like you have to be in the country, surrounding yourself in the environment to learn it or enhance it. You need to practice it more. Once you learn it after an hour or two, you go back to English; you rarely get the chance to use it." Rebecca pointed out that regardless of how it is learned, language cannot be maintained without consistent exposure or practice; instead, it will be forgotten and neglected.

Pulling from Edna and Rebecca's narratives, there is a consensus of a preference for

learning their ethnic language through the community and home as opposed to a formal academic setting. The home and ethnic community acted as areas of exposure, places where they can engage with the ethnic language.

From Edna's account, it appears that being exposed is not enough to learn and maintain the ethnic language. Language maintenance and retention is accredited to practice. This practice refers to active conversation and engagement within the ethnic community, which can be easily accessed through the home setting. This arena of ethnic language heritage speakers is the exposure that Rebecca refers to. This community-based arena, as opposed to academic settings, provides opportunities to utilize the ethnic language interpersonally and realistically, allowing language maintenance and proficiency.

Within the fluent interviewees, there were fears of being unable to maintain their language or of forgetting it altogether. They describe their language maintenance to be that of exposure; the household was a place central for both exposure and practice.

Delilah strongly believes that her ethnic language fluency is a result of her constant exposure and engagement with the ethnic community, allowing her to practice speaking. "I was able to practice it a lot by talking with Viet friends who visit and family members. I went to Viet parties and went out in Vietnam. I talked to the Vietnamese crowd in high school. I was able to practice with people." Delilah experienced multiple situations being exposed to the languages, which then provided her with many opportunities to practice.

However, since moving to college she is slowly feeling the weakening of that maintenance. "I realize how often I don't speak Viet and I should speak more. I can feel myself losing it slowly." By leaving the household for college, she also lost opportunities to be exposed

to the Vietnamese language and found herself in non-Vietnamese speaking spaces—spaces where she cannot practice her ethnic language.

Eric finds himself in a similar situation as Delilah in UC Berkeley. By leaving the household for college, Eric lacked a Japanese community; he lost the exposure to the Japanese language and opportunities to practice it.

“In Berkeley, I speak Japanese zero times a week. There’s no one to talk to. I thought I was going to forget Japanese, so I started reading a book in Japanese. Whenever there is a phone call with my parents, I can feel my tongue not going over the words smoothly as I want it to be. Not enough daily repetition of speaking that language makes me forget how stuff sounds. Back home, I speak it every day.”

Eric learned Japanese in both a traditional and formal sense; he was taught by his mother, who only spoke Japanese, and by the Japanese online programs and textbooks she had found for him. Specifically, Eric learned Japanese by way of reading, writing, videos, and exposure until the end of middle school. In fear of losing proficiency in his heritage language, Eric turns to reading a Japanese book, similar to how he learned Japanese, providing himself the exposure and opportunity of maintaining his language away from his ethnic community.

“You’re a Fake Asian”

Ethnic belonging is a membership that is deemed by members of that ethnicity. The degree of that belonging appears to be dependent on how much the coethnics associate individuals with their respective ethnic community; it is not reliant on the thoughts or ideals of the outer group. Friendship echoed this notion by saying, “As the only Vietnamese person present, I could say anything in gibberish and the white people would clap” signifying that his

ethnic identity is not contingent on the opinions of outer-ethnic individuals but those of his coethnics. Within my interviews, language has been described to be analogous to a membership card to justify acceptance into the ethnic community. It also appears that language does not have a toll on a pan-ethnic Asian identity, but on that of an ethnic-specific identity. Rebecca voiced, “I’m proud to say I’m Asian; I don’t think of it as a bad thing, but I am embarrassed when I’m saying I’m Chinese or Vietnamese because the next question will be if you speak well.” Rebecca feels uncomfortable identifying with an ethnic-specific identity in contrast to a pan-ethnic identity because she feels expected to prove herself by speaking the heritage language of that ethnicity. Having a lack of linguistic proficiency makes it difficult for individuals to outwardly identify with their ethnic community.

John shared his struggles about being accepted by his coethnics and how it has taken a toll on how he self-identifies as Chinese American. John’s struggles were a result of being labeled as a “Fake Asian”, as opposed to a “Full Asian” by Chinese immigrants due to his inability to speak Mandarin fluently. He was told by a Chinese immigrant: “If you don’t know how to say it, then you shouldn’t say it all.” In response, John did not speak the language at all unless it was with someone he was comfortable with; this provided safety from the judgment of his coethnics. Although John describes his language proficiency to be intermediate, he says that if he couldn’t pronounce a word correctly, he wouldn’t speak it at all.

Furthermore, he asserts that even if he could speak the language, the pronunciation would still sound wrong. The label of “Fake Asian” has a toll on the second-generation ethnic identity because it not only signifies the rejection from the ethnic community by coethnics, but also creates an internalized dissociation from themselves and the ethnic community. John describes the label to be degrading, causing him to question if he was “really Chinese”. “It tells

me you don't belong to 'Chinese', that you're different from just Chinese; you're Chinese American. I felt like I shouldn't identify myself as Chinese, but as Chinese American or Asian American or ABC." In the alternative labels John felt he should identify himself with, there is no complete rejection of his own ethnic identity; he is still Chinese, however the usage of the terms of American or AB, American Born, acts as a buffer to how Chinese he felt his identity was.

Michelle echoed similar feelings of not identifying entirely with her ethnic identity. "My lack of knowledge of the Korean language makes me wonder if I am really Korean. I definitely feel less Korean, but not that I wasn't [am not] Korean." Michelle could not refute the reality of her being Korean American; however, she feels a lack of legitimacy behind her identity. Currently, Michelle describes a sense of security in her Korean identity as a result of learning her heritage language. "If I didn't speak Korean, I don't know how Korean I would feel; aside from the cultural things, language makes it more—it makes it feel more concrete."

Eric is an example of how one's heritage language proficiency allows one to be quickly accepted by their coethnics. In entering the Japanese educational system during the summers of his youth, Eric was introduced to an unfamiliar, solely Japanese-speaking environment. He recalls the initial thoughts the other children had of him; they labeled Eric as a foreigner from America. "Knowing the language and knowing the dialect allowed me to quickly be introduced to the environment. I felt I was accepted; my Japanese wasn't the sharpest like theirs, but I felt more included in the conversations." Eric's language proficiency allowed him to be quickly integrated and accepted by the other Japanese children. Although he might have been a foreigner, his Japanese proficiency and Osaka dialect provided membership and justification for his acceptance into his ethnic community. Eric's ability to avoid rejection and ostracization from

the new ethnic environment due to shared language echoes Michelle's thoughts about language in the household. She iterated, "It's easier being able to have one language as the standard and have everyone be fluent; there are no points of confusion." Eric also experienced this acceptance from his extended family, who was more inclined to talk to him, knowing that he is proficient in Japanese. Holding the heritage language as the primary standard incentivizes and encourages members of the ethnic community to talk with one another; meeting this standard results in acceptance to the community. Eric's proficiency in the shared language acts as a commonality to bond with rather than a reason for rejection.

Connecting to Culture Conversationally

Throughout the interviews, it becomes apparent that language is central in the household; language allows communication between child and parent. In a majority of the interviews, the heritage language, accompanied at times by English, is the primary language spoken by the immigrant parent and family. Friendship shared this sentiment: "Where else would I speak Vietnamese outside of family?" Vietnamese was the only language he communicated in with his mother; however, his lack of fluency is associated with the rift between himself and his immigrant family. Friendship wishes that his fluency could improve in order for him to become closer with his mother, aunts, and uncles, who he feels he does not know on a personal level. If he was fluent, he says, he would ask how their days were and how they were feeling; he would also be able to share his own experiences. "I'm unable to communicate to my mom about complex topics, especially about mental health. It's hard to connect with culture when you're unable to talk to someone who experiences all that culture: my mom." Friendship equates this rift between himself and his family due to the language barrier which acts as an obstacle to his experiences and assimilation into his ethnic community. His mother acts as that gateway;

however, by being unable to communicate with her, Friendship is unable to immerse himself in his ethnic heritage.

Edna shares similar sentiments near the end of her interview: “Through this conversation, I realize how language is a huge part of my identity. It’s a huge part of culture. Fluency just means being able to communicate with other Viet people, so I stopped reaching out to Viet only speaking people.” Edna gained a perspective of how language acts as a facet of culture and ethnic identity. She realizes that language provides permission to speak with individuals who have experienced her heritage and are then able to share it with her. However, her inability to communicate has deterred her from her own ethnic community, estranging herself from heritage and ultimately creating a lack of confidence in her Vietnamese identity.

Conway also echoed this sentiment, feeling that language works as an avenue to experiencing culture by way of shared stories between oneself and their ethnic community. He also furthers this idea by asserting that language and culture are inherently linked—they perpetuate one another: culture is maintained by language and language maintains culture.

“That’s something expected of us sometimes, knowing the language. It’s expected of us because of traditions in Viet culture. There’s always been a sense of upholding culture and tradition in the household, and the easiest way to do that is to speak the language and pass it on to the kids. Moving to America, children lose their connection to the culture. I’m not connected, so the easiest way to stay connected is to speak the language. Being able to speak it allows you to connect conversationally with elders, to uncover some heritage, and to learn more about the past that you didn't know.”

Conway shares that by being able to speak the language, he is able to communicate with elders for a deeper understanding of his ethnic culture. He further asserts that being able to speak

the language is a way of maintaining cultural identity. Conway describes speaking Vietnamese as the simplest way to feel connected with his Vietnamese identity. Due to the complex negotiations of cultural traditions in American society, speaking is an easier way of practicing culture.

Delilah agrees with Conway in that speaking her language is a way for her to maintain and eventually pass on her ethnic culture. “I want to practice it so I can pass it on to my family. I don't want to not remember my culture; I don't want to be white-washed.” Delilah is fearful that by not speaking Vietnamese, she will be unable to share her culture with her own family and children. The inability to pass on culture is what she labels as being “white-washed”—complete assimilation into American society and, ultimately, a complete loss of her ethnic identity. When asked about how she would feel if she lost her fluency, Delilah returned to the theme of culture. “Language plays a huge factor in connecting to culture because traditions involve language and interacting with people. You feel a sense of community.” If Delilah lost her Vietnamese proficiency, she would have experienced a loss within herself and her cultural identity because of how deeply integrated she was into her ethnic community. She would feel disconnected from her family, especially her Grandfather, somebody who only speaks Vietnamese. The inability to speak with him or any other Vietnamese individual is ultimately the inability to immerse herself in her culture and community as interacting with said community members was the direct gateway to culture and cultural education.

Discussion and Conclusion

As I interviewed these participants, family appeared to play a huge role in how language played a part in ethnic belonging. It is from the immediate family that the participants experience ethnic and cultural connectivity or disconnect. All of the interviewees, regardless of

success, had a want to speak their heritage language more fluently in order to overcome a generational language barrier and communicate with their immediate families. Language acted as an instrument for the second generation to become more intimate with the immigrant family, their ethnic community. Additionally, all of the interviewees also agreed that in some modicum, their connectedness with family acted as an indicator of how culturally connected they were. Based on the narratives of my participants, the degree of ethnic belonging of second generation Asian Americans is dependent on how they interpret their own connectivity with the ethnic culture. This alone is not sufficient as the Asian Americans' sense of belonging is also dependent on the acceptance or rejection by their ethnic community, typically dictated by the family unit.

This process of ethnic belonging as a result of self-identification by way of coethnic acceptance and cultural connectedness appears to hinge on the connectivity of the second-generation individual and their intermediate family. This familial connectivity correlates with the fluency and proficiency of the ethnic language. Thus, this process causes ethnic belonging to be dependent on familial connectedness with language as its catalyst. Ethnic belonging being contingent on familial connection by way of language is reminiscent of the importance of ethnic communities for Asian American immigrants. Ethnic communities were important resources and spaces that allowed Asian American immigrants to find community and familiarity in a new country; it was a space where they could find common beliefs, traditions, culture, and language. However, the second generation does not rely as heavily on an ethnic community because they have integrated themselves into American society, adopting and assimilating to the norms of America and garnering general acceptance from a community that is not reliant on their heritage language. However, I propose that one's family acts as an

ethnic community, similar to how ethnic communities have interacted with Asian American immigrants. The second generation utilizes their ethnic community, the intermediate family, as a way to connect with their ethnic culture and heritage. In order to fully engage with their intermediate family, a gateway of cultural immersion and education, they must overcome a generational language barrier by being proficient and fluent in their heritage language. By overcoming this language barrier, the second generation will be able to achieve a sense of ethnic belonging by connecting with their ethnic heritage and, ultimately, self identify with their ethnic identity. I suspect it is how proficient individuals are with their heritage language that allows the second generation to self-identify with their ethnic community: low levels of heritage language proficiency correlate with an inability to identify with one's ethnic identity. Alternatively, high levels of heritage language proficiency correlate with an ability to identify with their ethnic identity, further showcasing the relationship between ethnic belonging and language. Ultimately, language proficiency and ethnic belonging are intertwined with one another and are catalyzed by personal identification, coethnic approval, and cultural connection.

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