

## Tracking Social Change through Sound Change: The LOT/THOUGHT merger among Chinese- & Irish-Americans in San Francisco, California

English vowel production is undergoing a shift in California (Eckert 2008), and one of the most robust aspects of the shift is the merger between the vowels in LOT and THOUGHT (DeCamp 1953). While the ‘low-back merger’ is quite advanced for much of the Western United States, the distinction is still maintained in San Francisco, California (Labov, Ash, & Boberg 2006). The present paper analyzes the LOT/THOUGHT merger in interview data from a stratified sample of 40 speakers from one San Francisco neighborhood. The results show that the population as a whole is moving in apparent time toward complete merger, while ethnographic analysis further suggests that the continued maintenance of the distinction among individuals can be understood with respect to shifting language ideologies and recent changes in the local linguistic marketplace.

The neighborhood’s ethnic distribution has undergone rapid change since the 1970s, as residents of majority Irish and other European backgrounds were increasingly replaced by residents of majority Chinese and other East Asian backgrounds. Approximately half of the current population is Asian American, and the other half European American. Because of the historical trajectory, ethnicity is linked to neighborhood identity in relation to periods of social change: Irish American identity is part of the constructed past, while Chinese American identity indexes present-day community membership. I argue that the maintenance of the low back vowel distinction, and specifically a raised production of the THOUGHT vowel, has become reimagined as a resource for constructing a more traditional neighborhood identity, while production of the merger, or a lowered production of THOUGHT, aligns a speaker with an emerging linguistic identity that is aligned with broader regional norms. The production of the low back vowels thus aligns a speaker with a particular linguistic marketplace that is itself created through speakers’ constructions of ethnicity and local authenticity.

When explaining patterns of sound change through correlations with social variables, we also want to understand *why* specific linguistic and social variables become linked within and across communities. To this end, research in sociolinguistics has demonstrated a renewed interest in the meanings of linguistic variables, specifically the range of social meanings and specific styles that variables index in their use on the ground in day-to-day life (Eckert 2008b). This paper argues that the motivations for linguistic changes in progress are observable in social changes in progress, and that the distribution of competing variants emerges from the social meaning speakers attach to those variants.

### *Sources Cited:*

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