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Hoisan-wa in Jest: Humor, Laughter, and the Construction of Counter-Hegemonic Affect in Contemporary Chinese American Language Maintenance

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Abstract: This research examines the language and cultural maintenance of Chinese Americans of a specific heritage: *Hoisan-wa* people. *Hoisan-wa* is one of the languages linking nearly all early Chinese immigrants in the U.S., but this language background has been pushed aside by the presence of other Chinese languages in America, such as Standard Cantonese and Mandarin. It has also been perpetually omitted from research for the last 150 years.

Drawing from 93 sociolinguistic interviews with *Hoisan-wa* heritage people, I explore instances of humor and laughter as these participants talk about their cultural and linguistic heritage. Home and family remain two of the few domains that are consistently available to heritage language speakers, making them key foci in studying heritage language development. Unsurprisingly then, many of the humorous ways in which respondents engaged with – and commented meta-linguistically about – *Hoisan-wa* had to do with words and phrases related to the home and family. I contend that these humorous moments serve to construct a counter-hegemonic affective stance that pushes back against established negative ideologies about *Hoisan-wa*, thereby creating a space to reflect and comment on language ideologies and enable speakers to adopt a language-as-resource view towards their heritage language.

Keywords: humor, language maintenance, language ideology, Chinese Americans

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1 Historical and linguistic overview

Nearly all Chinese immigrants from the 1800s to 1970s spoke some variety of "Cantonese" originating in the Lliyip/Szeyap/Seiyap (四邑, literally: "Four Districts") region. As explained by McCoy, the Lliyip region is an area in Guang-dong (廣東) province in mainland China which consists of four districts: Taishan (台山), Kaiping (開平), Enping (恩平) and Xinhui (新會) (1966). Chan and Lee

note that "The Seiyap group accounted for approximately 70–90% of the resident Chinese population in various communities in the period 1870–1930" (1981: 121). Because of the proximity of this region to various seaports, much of the early ethnic Chinese immigration to the U.S. came from these four districts, with Taishan sending off the greatest number of people, mostly as laborers. Speakers from the Taishan region of the Four Districts spoke *Hoisan-wa* (台山話)[1], also known as "Toisanese" or "Toishanese," as it is known in Standard Cantonese, and "Taishanese:" its Modern Standard Mandarin name. While there are obvious regional differences in the varieties spoken in these four districts, they are generally lumped together as a monolithic "Cantonese."

The Chinese Americans who can trace their ancestors' arrival to the U.S. to the 19th and mid-20th centuries come from a shared Lliyip ancestral heritage language that differs linguistically, culturally and historically from Mandarin, the current standard language of China and Taiwan. The exponential rise in the status of Mandarin today has resulted in the heightened demand for, and consumption of, Mandarin language classes and bilingual enrichment programs. For all Chinese Americans of these various "Cantonese" backgrounds, then, this shift in the political economy of language requires the negotiation, and even in some cases, the erasure of language backgrounds. Domain analysis data, which looked at self-reported language use across different domains and situations (e.g., school, parents, work), across three generations of Hoisan heritage people in the U.S. also point to a language shift from *Hoisan-wa* to English. This shift to English is not particularly surprising considering other immigrant groups in the U.S. face similar trends.

Much of the current metalinguistic and metapragmatic commentary about "Chinese" in both scholarly and popular discourse – that is, the discussion of what "Chinese" is, considering how it has been changed and re-appropriated over time – has both explicitly and implicitly privileged Mandarin over all other Chineses. This directly impacts how varieties like *Hoisan-wa* are thought of and

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1 The romanization of 台山話 is something I have struggled with, and given great consideration to. I have chosen to romanize *Hoisan-wa* as such because this is how it is pronounced by its speakers. Many refer to *Hoisan-wa* as "Toisanese," with a voiceless alveolar plosive [t], indicative of how a Cantonese speaker – but not a *Hoisan-wa* speaker – would say it. Being myself a user of both varieties, and having discussed this issue with younger speakers of *Hoisan-wa* in the U.S., I feel it is most fair to name *Hoisan-wa* in the way I have done, maintaining the glottal [h] sound. I have deliberately stayed away from the Mandarin Romanization "Taishanese." I recognize that these choices break from traditional Romanization schemes, but my choices are intended to make *Hoisan-wa* visible, and to deemphasize Cantonese and Mandarin. For standardized place locations in China only, I will maintain the Modern Standard Mandarin (MSM) Romanization (e.g., Taishan).

talked about. What little work is done on non-Mandarin language acquisition and maintenance in the U.S. hardly ever distinguishes Cantonese from *Hoisan-wa*; as such, *Hoisan-wa* as a language background is muddled: people know the background exists, for instance "in Chinatown," but nothing more. Yet resilient traces of *Hoisan-wa* manifest themselves in works by such renowned pioneers of Asian American literature as Maxine Hong Kingston, even if they are almost always just called "Cantonese" or, at most, "the village dialect" (though "Toishan" as a place name is sometimes mentioned). *Hoisan-wa* can also be seen in "Chinese" word borrowings into English such as chop-suey and chow mein.[2]

Distinguishing *Hoisan-wa* from Cantonese serves the practical purpose of focusing on a language that many Chinese Americans can easily trace their roots to, but know little about. In a climate where Mandarin Chinese is so publicized and valued, it becomes even more critical to look at the historical shaping of this neglected Chinese American population of *Hoisan-wa* heritage, whose histories and language backgrounds will slowly continue to be erased if they are perpetually omitted from research.

2 Frameworks

Two main frameworks guide this research: language ideologies and multicompetence/symbolic competence. I also draw from linguistic anthropological notions of performance and register humor to contextualize and situate the humorous excerpts as they relate to language ideologies and multicompetence/ symbolic competence.

2.1 Language ideologies

Language ideologies can be described as the ways in which thoughts about language shape how speakers and communities come to understand and to value (or devalue) what they speak. Kroskrity defines language ideologies as the views about language that benefit a specific group, while Wortham describes them as

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2 In the etymological literature, these words are credited as being loan words from "Cantonese;" however, as any *Hoisan-wa* speaker can attest, if 雜碎 ("chop-suey") and 炒麵 ("chow mein") were read in *Hoisan-wa*, the sounds would be more true to the English spelling than Standard (Hong Kong or Guangzhou) Cantonese would. Phonologically, the "uey" and "ei" diphthongs are not found in the Standard Cantonese readings of these words, though they are in the *Hoisan-wa* readings.

the linkage between certain linguistic features, with typifications of certain events or people, that can also be used to look at broader social and power relations (Kroskrity 2001; Wortham 2008). These typifications do not have to be made explicit; rather, language ideology is often in its most potent form when it is least visible (Fairclough 1989). Negative esteem of one's language may lead to language loss, but groups that do not benefit from dominant language ideologies are never completely disenfranchised, since it is always possible to challenge those in power through counter-hegemonic language ideologies (Achugar 2008). Such counter-hegemonic ideologies, or counter-narratives (Delgado 1989; Solórzano and Yosso 2002), directly challenge existing "mainstream" ways of thinking and doing.

In other work (Leung 2011a, 2011b), I have detailed many of the negative ideologies attached to *Hoisan-wa*, such as the view that it is a "rural" and "uneducated" language, disrupting a future-oriented ideology of modernity, and the notion that it is "awkward" or "unnatural" to speak *Hoisan-wa* in contemporary U.S. society, which prizes fluency in English. This paper, however, will focus solely on the importance of laughter, and the humorous moments that I encountered with many of the interviewees during my conversations with them about *Hoisan-wa*, showing how laughter and humor are used to construct positive ideologies about *Hoisan-wa*.

2.2 Multicompetency and symbolic competence

The notion of multicompetence, or "the knowledge of more than one language in the same mind" (Cook 1994), operates under the premise that multicompetent (multilingual) speakers have different knowledge of the languages in their linguistic repertoires than monocompetent (monolingual) native speakers. As such, bilingual or multilingual people have greater metalinguistic awareness, cognitive flexibility, originality and fluency (Belz 2002; Bialystok 1999). This knowledge of multiple languages within one mind involves a dynamic understanding of bi/multilingualism, where language users, or speaker-hearers, readily draw from resources available in their language repertoires (Cook 2002).

Kramsch notes how current trends in global, social and economic inequalities call for the need to attend to symbolic competence, wherein language users and learners are viewed as "not just communicators and problem solvers, but whole persons with hearts, bodies, and minds, with memories, fantasies, loyalties, identities. Symbolic forms are not just items of vocabulary or communication strategies, but embodied experiences, emotional resonances, and moral imaginings" (2006: 251). It is important to draw attention to form, genre, style, register and social semiotics in understanding how speakers view themselves, what they

remember about their pasts and how they envision their futures. Kramsch and Whiteside write that "symbolic competence is the ability to perform and construct various historicities in dialogue with others" (2008: 665). That is to say, rather than viewing symbolic competence as a skill or a utilitarian communicative competence, symbolic competence allows "relationships of possibility" (van Lier 2004: 105) where a multilingual actor can "see him/herself through his/her own embodied history and subjectivity and through the history and subjectivity of others" (Kramsch and Whiteside 2008: 668). Pomerantz and Bell echo this sentiment, noting that better understanding "the meaning of form in all its manifestations (e.g. linguistic, textual, visual, acoustic, poetic)" (2007: 570) helps expand how researchers conceive of what it means to have knowledge of a language. Thus, viewing the data presented in this paper in light of symbolic competence will allow us to examine the ways in which interviewees use humor in or about *Hoisan-wa* as a means to construct positive ideologies.

2.3 Performance calibrations and register humor

Adding a more anthropological perspective, Bauman's (2004) research on performance and aesthetic puts forward the idea of calibration, where speakers adjust and align their utterances for different contexts and purposes. Howard mentions in her work on Thai children's play genres that "performers make minute 'calibrations' in their genre performances to align these with new contexts by tweaking form, function, or theme" (2009: 345). Because these utterances are based on existing social expectations and norms of speaking, they are contextually relevant and understandable to interlocutors with shared linguistic repertoires. Knowledge of humor is not situated within the minds of individual speakers but rather in social use. Similarly, the framing of an activity as "play" as opposed to "serious" is also interactionally situated. As Cook notes, "In fact it is very often . . . attitude which makes something play rather than anything intrinsic to the behaviour per se. People are playing when they say and believe they are playing" (2000: 101). This notion of attitude is similar to what other researchers might call one's affective stance, which "includes a person's mood, attitude, feeling or disposition as well as degrees of emotional intensity" (Ochs 2002: 109). In conversational interaction, affective stance is seen as an integral part in evaluating objects, positioning subjects and alignment between subjects (Biber and Finegan 1989): this is similar to the notion of play frames associated with communication studies.

   Attardo provides a germane explanation of what he calls "humor-beyond-the-joke," or register humor, which he defines as "humor caused by an incongruity

originating in the clash between two registers. Registers may be pre-theoretically defined as language varieties associated with a given situation, role, or social aspect of the speakers' experience" (1994: 230). Attardo delineates the types of linguistic scripts, which he defines as well-established information and routines for doing things, and going about activities that come with being a speaker of a language. Similar to the notions of "ways of speaking" (Hymes 1974) and the more recent term "ethnopragmatics" (Goddard 2006), linguistic scripts are not binding; rather, individuals can manipulate, subvert and play creatively with these scripts. Attardo explains that register humor comes across as humorous only when the relevant register associations and linguistic scripts associated with these registers are activated within the interaction.

Blommaert (2010) also takes on the notion of register when he discusses discourses of minoritized languages, postulating that languages exist as specialized registers, imbued with their own indexical values and functions for the members of the speech community. If we are to understand what most people conceive as "languages" as specialized registers, in order to understand how these registers become functionally specialized, it is necessary to look at the local-level interactions where these registers are used. I use the above combination of notions of register as the basis of my rationale to explore the laughter and humor displayed by *Hoisan-wa* heritage people, since humorous interaction is one possible domain where *Hoisan-wa* language use is part of the specialized multilingual resources that are available to this group of Chinese Americans as a legitimate linguistic resource.

2.3.1 Recognizing and identifying humor

One of the most accepted theories in humor studies is that humor emerges when there is incongruity between "what people expect and what they get" (Berger 2011). As far as we understand the world vis-à-vis our interactions with humor, satire and irony, situations where tensions exist are especially fraught with multiple indices and complex discourses. As Gournelos and Greene (2011) state, what is worth studying is not necessarily the mechanics of how humor is successful, but rather the functions of humor and the implications for dismantling or upholding sociopolitical systems. Kessel (2012) also points to the fact that there is political meaning behind humor, noting that it is a means of negotiating identities, boundaries and belonging. Since this fundamentally involves demarcating inclusion versus exclusion, the examination of humor becomes a way of analyzing societies, groups and subgroups, as well as status hierarchies. Kuipers demon-

strates how humor and laughter allow people to reflect and provide commentary on "social and moral sensitivities" (2012: 195). In other words, humor has the power to "encode, engender, and entextualize social categorization" (Queen 2005: 242).

With respect to identifying humor, Bell (2005) identifies contextualized cues like laughter, exaggerated intonation or prosody, marked vocabulary and shifts in registers to recognize humor. She writes, "If a speaker's turn contained laughter, this was considered as a clue that the speaker intended his or her comment to be interpreted playfully" (2005: 198–199). I adopt a similar protocol to look for humorous occurrences in my data, which were generally not difficult to pinpoint. I view laughter as a sign of amusement from the audience (Graesser et al. 1989) that can be the result of humorous exchanges: just as humor forces social actors to take a stance on their identities, laughter also indicates the recognition of a certain identity (Queen 2005). Additionally, following Pomerantz and Bell's research on playful interactions in the foreign language classroom where code-switching was used to signal a speaker's non-serious intent (2007: 563), I also paid close attention to instances of code-switching in my data.

3 Research question and methodology

The research question driving this paper came from a larger interview-based qualitative research project that examined intergenerational language maintenance in *Hoisan-wa* speaking people in northern California. I engaged in sociolinguistic interviews with 93 participants, ranging from ages 8 to 97; participants were solicited via friend-of-a-friend method and snowball sampling. To gather as complete a picture as possible of the diverse range of Hoisan-heritage people in northern California, participants had to be of Hoisan heritage on either the maternal or paternal side (or both), and had to have lived in northern California for a consecutive period of time. The interviews were conducted in *Hoisan-wa*, Cantonese, and/or English (or a combination of all three depending on the interviewee) and lasted from 20 to 90 minutes, with a total number of 45 hours of spoken data collected. I aimed to examine both the linguistic elements of *Hoisan-wa* (e.g., lexicon, phonology) as well as the language ideologies and discourse around it (e.g., why *Hoisan-wa* was worth or not worth promoting and maintaining).

All in-person interviews were digitally audio recorded and later transcribed in the original language(s) of the interlocutors. Transcripts included four tiers: 1) the Chinese characters, 2) the Romanization of those characters, 3) the word-for-word

literal gloss, and 4) the English translation.[3] Once I transcribed all my interviews, I viewed and analyzed the transcripts and field notes through a process of open coding drawing from grounded theory, as detailed in Emerson, Fretz and Shaw (1995). As I was going through my data and creating themes with which to organize my findings, I noticed that there were a number of humorous instances that had to do squarely with *Hoisan-wa*, as well as laughter that emerged at what seemed like important moments in the establishment of positive affect towards *Hoisan-wa*. This struck me as relevant, so I decided to explore the theme of humor and laughter with the following research question: in light of the many negative ideologies about *Hoisan-wa* in the contemporary linguistic arena of the U.S., how are multilingual people of *Hoisan-wa* heritage using humor to engage with and comment about their linguistic heritage? The nature of this research question is admittedly *ex post facto*, but I contend that the examples I describe are worthy of discussion and serve as a way for counter-narratives of *Hoisan-wa* to emerge via humorous utterances.

4 Reporting of data

The following are some of the humorous exchanges from my data. I have separated the occurrences into two main types: 1) participants' jokes and plays on words and 2) their humorous voicings and enactments of *Hoisan-wa*.

4.1 Jokes and plays on words

One of the questions I asked my participants was what they call their heritage language. This question was relevant because, as mentioned earlier, *Hoisan-wa* is part of the "Four Districts" (Lliyip/Szeyap, 四邑) language group, and sometimes it is called "Lliyip" or "Seiyap." It is also generalized as "Cantonese," and sometimes is even just called "Chinese." Though I make the personal decision to call this language *Hoisan-wa*, given this pluri-denominating phenomenon, I wanted to know how other Chinese Americans referred to their heritage language.

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3 In this paper, all responses embedded in text or on one line were said in English. All romanizations will be in *Hoisan-wa* unless otherwise stated. Those responses that were stated in *Hoisan-wa* will have four tiers: 1) Chinese characters, 2) Romanization, 3) literal gloss and 4) English translation. Statements made in Cantonese will also have the same four tiers but will be marked as Cantonese.

One participant, LNW (073, F, age 46), a Chinese American woman whose first language was *Hoisan-wa* and who later learned Cantonese and English in formal school settings, said this about what she calls her heritage language, "We say Hoisanwaa, I guess we called it Lliyip too. Now I say I speak Seven Up. Certain things I say [in] Seiyap, certain things I say [in] Saamyap [laughs]." In Cantonese, 四邑 ("four districts") is called "Seiyap," and the neighboring locale, 三邑 ("three districts" comprising 南海 Naamhoi, 番禺 Punyu, and 順德 Shundak), is called "Saamyap." The "seven" in "Seven Up" comes from the three and four districts added together, and "up" is a play on the word "Yap," meaning district. She was not the only respondent who joked that she spoke "Seven Up," referring to a hybrid language of *Hoisan-wa* and Cantonese.

LNW's use of "Seven Up" carries importance for Hoisan heritage speakers who have knowledge of *Hoisan-wa* and Cantonese; that is, for those who have enough background knowledge to add "three" and "four" together. By bringing in the English name of a popular soft drink as a near-homophone, this code-switched joke draws upon English and Cantonese, as well as *Hoisan-wa* in order to be successfully humorous. In other words, multiple register associations and linguistic scripts connected with these registers were activated, thereby allowing the joke to be funny. What is particularly striking about the code-switched nature of this joke is that "Seven Up" must undergo a process of three-way code-switching in order to be derived.

Table 1: Process of three-way code-switching to derive "Seven Up"

	Language	四邑 ('four districts')	三邑 ('three districts')
Step 1	*Hoisan-wa*	Lliyip	Llaamyip
Step 2	Cantonese	Seiyap	Saamyap
Step 3	English	Seven Yap >> Seven Up	

With *Hoisan-wa* as the starting point, speakers and listeners must first "translate" *Hoisan-wa* into Cantonese to get the "Yap" in Seven Up, since going straight from *Hoisan-wa* to English would result in the "Seven" but "Yip" instead. Thus, interaction among all three languages is necessary in order to make this association work, a perfect illustration of multicompetency and the linguistic flexibility of *Hoisan-wa* speakers as they deploy the resources available in their linguistic repertoires. As Chen (2008) notes in reference to language choice and code-switching among returnee and local Hong Kongers, two subgroups of the same community, each group uses distinctive code-switching styles to (re)position themselves in relation to others. Similarly, this example of "Seven Up" shows how Hoisan heritage people, a Chinese American subgroup often lumped in with the

larger "Cantonese" community, deploy distinct markers of linguistic identity. Better understanding these positionings helps to "unveil some of the local ideologies at work" (Chen 2008: 72). Since comprehending this distinct style of three-way code-switching requires the multicompetent understanding of all three language varieties, at least some positive orientation towards *Hoisan-wa* linguistic identity is necessary to make this wordplay successful.

The next example comes from a conversation with WL (083, M, age 54) and ML (084, M, age 55), who were discussing how *Hoisan-wa* was considered more "laid back" and "slang:"

> ML: It's not as formal [laughs] which is good!
> G: Why is it good?
> ML: Because it gives it life! It's really punctuated, a lot of emotion, we have more passion. [laughs]

Rather than viewing such informality as a negative attribute, ML associates this with *Hoisan-wa* speakers' passion, which gives life to their language. This statement reminds WL, ML's brother-in-law, of his uncle's 80th birthday banquet, where all of his uncle's older friends and relatives sang to him:

> WL: They started to sing to him, in Toisan, and what amazes me, it sounded like a rap song! [laughs] And I said, wow! The Chinese did invent everything! They came out with rap even before! I could not believe it, not only the way they sang but they also danced to it! Like rapping, so I was amazed to see it, to hear Chinese rap song! From the old days, in Toisan! Everyone knew the song, it was all rap, rhymes and so I hope someone will bring that back. I should have recorded it. It's so amazing. So after that, I told everybody, wow, hip hop, Toisanese style. [laughs]
> ML: Yeah it's the whole culture, Toisan is almost like soul people. [laughs]

The transcript is speckled with laughter, indicating that the narrative is incongruous with what people might expect. Building upon ML's comment about *Hoisan-wa* speakers having more passion and emotion, WL recounts the time he heard and saw Chinese rap and dance, two forms of expression that are also associated with passion and emotion.

Interestingly, what WL is referring to is actually the performance of chanting wooden fish books (木魚書), and many of these chants originated from Buddhist texts. This singing style began around the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) and originated from the Guangdong area. Peasants in the villages, many of them illiterate, also learned these chants, and often created their own rhymes to sing for special holidays like birthdays. As these rhymes are quite lyrical, one could feasibly call them "Chinese rap," as WL does. This term is comical because rap is generally consid-

ered a more recent phenomenon with African American origins; WL's comment that "The Chinese did invent everything!" alludes to this cultural and chronological mismatch.

ML's response to WL, that Hoisan people are like "soul people," or people who are connected with soul music, ties back to his original point about passion and life: not only are Hoisan people connected to soul people from a musical perspective, to have "soul" also refers to having emotional energy or intensity, something ML had previously stated is a positive attribute of *Hoisan-wa*. This use of humor draws attention to a lesser-known fact about *Hoisan-wa* speakers, pushing back against the stereotypes circulating about them being rural and uneducated by showing the lively, emotive and soulful side of this linguistic heritage.

ML and WL's jokes and plays on words about *Hoisan-wa* and Hoisan people also reflect a sense of nostalgia, reminiscence and co-construction of historicity. WL repeatedly states how amazed he was with the performance, wishing he had recorded it. He even comments that he hopes "someone will bring that back," alluding to today's trend of shifting away from all things *Hoisan-wa*. This type of nostalgia, as Boyarin explains, has "the potential for creative collaboration between present consciousness and the experience or expression of the past" (1994: 22). Cavanaugh writes of similar ideologies of nostalgia and language loss in the northern Italian town of Bergamo, noting that "Through the affective positions of those who experience these longings, nostalgia constructs a dialectic between the past and the present, depending on both the experience of the past and a dwelling in the present in order to be meaningful" (2004: 25). This vignette between WL and ML, part humorous and part contemplative, served as such a dialectic between the past and the present. Through seeking out what one might call a funny exemplar of why *Hoisan-wa* language and culture is unique – namely, that they are the original Chinese hip hop artists – WL and ML orient themselves in a positive affective stance towards *Hoisan-wa* and construct symbolic competencies from embodied experiences with the language.

With the examples in this section, fully appreciating the humor and plays on words comes only through understanding *Hoisan-wa*. It is in this way, then, that the jokes elicited by my participants are linked to having a positive relationship with *Hoisan-wa*. In the next section I show how participants' comments about spoken *Hoisan-wa* also show a similar and even more pronounced positive affect.

4.2 Humorous voicings and enactments of Hoisan-wa

The previous examples mentioned require a certain degree of language fluency, potentially alienating many of the younger and middle-aged people of *Hoisan-wa*

heritage. As my domain analysis data show (Leung 2013), these two generational groups were more likely to use English, not *Hoisan-wa*. However, the data I present below suggest that despite limited productive fluency in *Hoisan-wa*, respondents were still able to engage in humorous ways with *Hoisan-wa* through voicing of situations where they remember *Hoisan-wa* being used.

Bauman (1993) states that eliciting any kind of story establishes a platform for, and elicits a performance by, the speaker. He posits that the speaker uses at least three framed displays to perform, including spoken interaction, which takes place between the performer and the audience and has to do with the choice of story and how it is introduced, the narrated story frame, which provides the necessary background information, and enactment, which makes the story come alive through recontextualization. I adopt Bauman and Briggs' definition of re-contextualization as a process of de-centering and re-centering, where speech events are "referred to, cited, evaluated, reported, looked back upon, replayed, and otherwise transformed in the production and reproduction of social life" (1990: 80).

Also inherent to any performance is the concept of voice, which constructs speakers' identities as well as juxtaposing them against each other. Following Bakhtin, as cited in Keane, I use voice to refer to how utterances index the various ways of speaking that are "associated, by virtue of linguistic ideologies with different character types, professions, genders, social statuses, kinship roles, moral stances, ideological systems, age groups, ethnicities, and so forth" (2001: 269). The juxtaposition of voices and selves at various times and places during the performance is what Goffman (1959) calls role distance, which is similar to what he later calls footing and what others may call speaker's stance. Theorists have noted that this distance helps to distinguish performance roles and selves (Haviland 1996; Levinson 1988). In the following examples, I illustrate how role distance makes it possible for some respondents (both individuals and groups) to use and comment favorably upon *Hoisan-wa* through enactment.

4.2.1 Individual laughter

In the literature on heritage language competency, the term "kitchen language" is often derisively used to refer to the so-called reduced heritage language input limiting the productive domain to household objects and phrases (Pavlenko and Malt 2011). Viewed differently, however this also means that home and family can be considered one of the few domains that remain consistently available to heritage language speakers, and can be a focal point of study in heritage language development. It should come as no surprise, then, that many of the humorous

ways in which respondents engaged with *Hoisan-wa* had to do with words and phrases related to the home and family. Many respondents brought up specific instances where they would overhear *Hoisan-wa* being used. For example, when I asked VL (003, M, age 28), to recall some of the *Hoisan-wa* words he could remember, he responded that he only knew a few words, including:

> 肚飢
> U gi
> Stomach hunger
> [I'm] hungry.
> [laughs]

One can assume that this phrase is one that was overheard with a large degree of frequency in VL's family life and therefore was memorable.

Other respondents also mentioned *Hoisan-wa* words or phrases that they recall hearing. For example, DH (006, M, age 29) remembers hearing his mother talk on the phone:

> DH: She usually says si fat (屎窟/"butthole") on the phone when my uncle calls. [laughs]
> G: Really? Wow!
> DH: It's funny! They're just messing with each other.
> G: She calls him si fat? [laughs]
> DH: Like I said, that's the only time I hear it [*Hoisan-wa*]. [laughs]

DH states that the only time he ever hears *Hoisan-wa* is when he overhears his mother talking to her brother, during which she uses a crass nickname for him. For DH, who self-reported that he understands no *Hoisan-wa*, this is still a salient word he can recall and laugh about. DH's wife, who understands some *Hoisan-wa* and Cantonese, had overheard our conversation when she walked by, and she later stated she was shocked that her husband knew how to say anything in *Hoisan-wa* at all.

One mother, LNW (073, F, age 46) recalls hearing her own children interacting with her monolingual *Hoisan-wa* mother, "And you can watch them, you know, they'll say um, "Did you eat lunch *ah*?" [slowly] [laughs] And they'll make it sound Chinese! Thinking that she'll get it? If they put that little Chinese accent on the end of their English?" While LNW reports that her children know very little *Hoisan-wa*, the fact that they know to add the sentence final particle "ah" (啊) to signal a question demonstrates some degree of proficiency, albeit nascent. LNW's laughter shows that she, a fluent *Hoisan-wa* speaker, finds it humorous that her children are using this *Hoisan-wa* sentence final particle, despite their limited proficiency in it.

Attardo's definition of register-based humor helps explain why these utterances are considered funny. Because register-based humor results from "an incongruity originating in the clash between two registers" (1994: 230), the clash between *Hoisan-wa* and English seems to be at the root of the humor. It becomes even more pronounced because in most of these cases, the speakers of the utterances – VL when he recalls hearing "I'm hungry," DH when he remembers his mother calling his uncle a "butthole," and LNW's children who add the *Hoisan-wa* sentence final particle at the end of their English utterances – are not thought of as knowing how to speak *Hoisan-wa* at all. The fact that they use *Hoisan-wa* phrases and particles, then, exemplifies shifts in role distance from their English-speaking selves to their (very occasional) *Hoisan-wa*-speaking selves. In essence, they are performing tropes of voicing, where voicing is not perceived as appropriate to context, producing "noncongruent indexical effects" (Agha 2005: 48). The incongruence caused by these participants' role disalignments produces humorous effects.

As such, if we consider Blommaert's notion that what we commonly think of as "languages" are actually different registers of multilingual resources (2010: 134), these examples taken together demonstrate that as a register both used to deploy in and reflect upon humorous settings, *Hoisan-wa* legitimately stands, without any negative esteem, as appropriate in this particular domain of use, even for younger generations. Amidst the disparaging ideologies about *Hoisan-wa*, this particular finding about the use of *Hoisan-wa* as a linguistic resource gives us slight pause to reflect upon notions and possibilities of contemporary *Hoisan-wa* language fluency and multicompetence. We should consider how people of Hoisan heritage who claim not be able to speak it are still able to calibrate *Hoisan-wa* utterances in playful and hybrid ways.

4.2.2 Group laughter: One particularly salient group example

In the four excerpts below, I draw from one group interview spanning over 90 minutes that yielded rich instances of group laughter and reflection. In this conversation JW (020, M, age 51), a fourth-generation Chinese American (who does not speak in this first excerpt), SW (018, F, age 49), his second-generation Chinese American wife, and EW (019), their 16-year-old daughter are discussing how they feel about *Hoisan-wa*:

SW: Toisan, that's more comical I guess.
     [everyone laughs]
SW: Sometimes I'll be on the phone with my mom and they'll all laugh.
     Like, 死唔死乜啊，死死死

        Like, lli mi lli mot aa llillilli
        Like, die not die SFP die die die
        Like, [in the conversation I'd say] "damn, why did that happen" something like that,
        "die die die."
        [laughs]
EW: NO! Cause I'm laughing at YOU!
SW: I know, because I'm talking, like, HAH? HAH? Like, what, what are you talking about?
        [everyone laughs]
SW: And when I speak, every time they know I'm on the phone with Mom, that's the only
        time I speak it [*Hoisan-wa*], so, it's um, yeah. . . .
EW: It's cute.

SW starts by saying she thinks that *Hoisan-wa* is "more comical," an explicit marker signaling that what follows might be a humorous exchange. She continues by enacting what she says is the only situation where she uses *Hoisan-wa*, which is when she is speaking with her mother. Her use of the quotative "like" sets off the enactment of a conversation she has with her mother, where she says animatedly, "'Damn, why did that happen' something like that, 'die die die'." This sparks laughter from her audience. It is unclear why exactly she chooses this content, though one could surmise that she does this for dramatic effect. As Harrison states, "Represented speech in the form of recontextualized utterances dramatizes and provides vividness to a narrative . . . However . . . it would be a mistake to believe that recontextualized speech always (or ever) exactly and factually recreates the exact words and intonation of the original utterance" (2011: 202). Building upon this premise, then, it is likely that SW uses this excerpt to index *Hoisan-wa*'s salient iconic attributes: being "rural" and "harsh-sounding." That is to say, in terms of symbolic competence, SW, recognizing the acoustic forms of *Hoisan-wa*, matches the "crass" content and the lateral fricative with what *Hoisan-wa* "should" sound like. The audience, in turn, recognizing these typifiable stereotypes of *Hoisan-wa*, bursts into laughter. In a juxtaposition of selves by which she distances her usually English-speaking self from her *Hoisan-wa*-speaking self, SW is able to enact a context where *Hoisan-wa* is legitimate as well as humorous.

    Additionally, SW says that when she is on the phone "they'll all laugh:" she thinks that her family is laughing at her language. However, her daughter EW states this is not the case; rather, she is actually "laughing at YOU," that is, laughing at SW being comical. EW sees her mother speaking *Hoisan-wa* as a type of comedic relief. Reaffirming that she is not laughing at the language *per se*, EW says that she thinks "it's cute" when her mother speaks in *Hoisan-wa*. The fact that EW is not ashamed of *Hoisan-wa* comes up again when she and her mother discuss whether or not EW should learn Mandarin in the future.

SW: Why would you be bowing up to Mandarin if you wanna let people learn about your own language [*Hoisan-wa*]?

EW: YEAH! That's what I, yeah, exactly!

SW: It's always good to learn more languages, but I wouldn't forget about your original language.

EW: Oh no! No, I can't ignore it.

We see from this exchange that bringing up *Hoisan-wa*, particularly enacting an imagined situation where it is used, triggers shared laughter and humor from the interlocutors. Additionally, this humorous context, perhaps because it brings about a comfortable, light-hearted environment, also opens up spaces for respondents to discuss *Hoisan-wa* and the role it plays in the family or home domain. In fact, based on my 45 hours of data with my participants, nearly all the positive statements about *Hoisan-wa* were centered around similarly light and humorous moments.

Soon after this exchange, SW, JW and EW begin talking about how *Hoisan-wa* would be used as a secret code among family and friends, which is also an indicator of its marginalized status among other languages. SW's brother, EL, and aunt, WW, have also joined the discussion, and WW and SW elicit examples of when they would use the secret code in public places.

WW: 快呢走啦，該
Faai nei dau laa, ko
Fast SUP run SFP like this
"Hurry up and leave," you'd say it like that.
[everyone laughs]

EL: That's right [laughs]

SW: 你該叻啊
Ni koi lek aa
You so smart SFP
You're so smart!
[everyone laughs]

SW: 唔好買啦，該貴e
Mho mai laa koi gwi e
Do not buy SFP so expensive SFP
Don't buy it, it's so expensive!
[everyone laughs]

JW: That's better than swearing.
[everyone laughs]

WW's use of 該 ("like this") signals that she is voicing "*Hoisan-wa*-as-a-secret-code," enacting a situation where it would be used with people who understand *Hoisan-wa*, in this case, a situation where she would warn her friends or family to

"hurry up and leave" because there was something undesirable in the vicinity. This sparks laughter from the group, and EL aligns himself with WW by saying "that's right." SW also aligns herself with WW in *Hoisan-wa*, praising her with "you're so smart!" These two lines are instances of metapragmatic commentary about appropriateness of *Hoisan-wa* use; that is, explicit talk of when its use is acceptable (Kroskrity 2001). This comment again elicits laughter from the audience. SW offers her own example of voicing "*Hoisan-wa*-as-a-secret-code" with "don't buy it, it's too expensive" in an imagined setting where she would tell her friends or family that what is being bought is too expensive without alerting the seller that she thinks this. Again, SW's example brings about laughter, and her husband offers additional metapragmatic commentary: "that's better than swearing." He considers the use of *Hoisan-wa* to be superior to swearing because it is the secret code: opinions, anger and frustration can be conveyed discreetly without foul language. We see that discussions about the appropriateness of *Hoisan-wa* use are mediated through its enactment through reported speech. This enactment affords speakers a degree of role distance: when they voice contexts where *Hoisan-wa* is appropriate, they become *Hoisan-wa* speakers in hypothetical but feasibly real situations (i.e., going out with friends and family and shopping for overpriced goods) but not *Hoisan-wa* speakers using it in "real life," where they can be attacked by the negative ideologies of others that are attached to their language use.

However, for some Hoisan heritage people, like JW in this next example, role distance is still not enough to reconcile the laughter and discomfort stemming from hesitation to readily use *Hoisan-wa*. The family's conversation turns to discussing other situations where they might use *Hoisan-wa* and whether they might talk to strangers in it:

JW: When someone asks me, if they're lost or something? I probably wouldn't say anything to them unless they ask me, look for directions or something.
G: Let's say you're in Chinatown or something and you see a, you know –
JW: I just stare at them, you know, I don't, I don't say . . .
WW: 啊叔啊
      Aasuk aa
      Ah uncle SFP
      Hey, uncle!
      [everyone laughs]
SW: 幾何賣啊
      Giho mai aa
      How sell SFP
      How is this sold? [how much does it cost?]
      [laughs]
JW: I still wouldn't talk to them.

WW: 士德頓街到乃啊?
　　　Sitoktungaai o naai a?
　　　Stockton street at where SFP
　　　Where's Stockton Street?
　　　[everyone laughs]
JW: I'd avoid them, yeah.
SW: If you wanted to buy something in the store, you're gonna have to speak Cantonese to them, asking for the price or something, you know.
SW: (in Cantonese) 你點賣啊，嗰啲嘢?
　　　Nei dim maai aah, godi je
　　　You how sell SFP those things
　　　How are those items being sold?
JW: I guess I would for a price or something.
SW: Yeah, they wouldn't give you a good cut of meat if you don't.

This exchange is similar to the last example in that the speakers are enacting situations where *Hoisan-wa* would be used, this time on the streets in San Francisco's Chinatown. Throughout the interchange JW insists that even if he were approached by someone who speaks *Hoisan-wa*, he would not use it to engage in conversation. In fact, he would just "stare at them," "still wouldn't talk to them" and would, ultimately, "avoid them," a stance that suggests his disalignment with his Hoisan heritage.

It is clear, though, that WW and SW do not align themselves as JW does. Through role distance and highlighting their *Hoisan-wa* selves, WW and SW enact voices that someone walking through Chinatown might encounter, as if to "tempt" JW to use *Hoisan-wa* with them. WW starts out with, "Hey Uncle," a common casual greeting for older males, except that JW is only 51 years old and a bit young to be called "Uncle." This elicits laughter from the audience. His wife, SW, throws out, "How is this sold?" indicating JW might ask that question because it is common utterance a customer might ask a produce vendor.

As the audience laughs again, JW continues to disalign himself from the role of *Hoisan-wa* speaker. WW then posits a situation where someone asks him in *Hoisan-wa*, "Where is Stockton Street?" Since everyone in the room grew up in San Francisco and frequented Chinatown, there was a shared understanding that JW knew where Stockton Street was and could give the appropriate directions. Laughter emerges because while this is a feasible question that one might hear in Chinatown, one would not hear it from a member of this particular audience: all the family members grew up in Chinatown, which causes the question's incongruity. This question offers JW the opportunity to be an expert, knowledgeable enough to give directions. When he still denies that he would speak *Hoisan-wa*, even to a lost stranger, his wife reasons that if he wanted to buy something in a store in Chinatown, he would at least need to speak to them in Cantonese. She

rephrases what she had said earlier in *Hoisan-wa* about asking how products are sold (幾何賣啊?) into Cantonese (你點賣啊，嗰啲嘢?), at which point JW finally concedes that perhaps he would ask for a price at the store. SW validates his statement by saying that "they wouldn't give you a good cut of meat if you don't," emphasizing that there is a hierarchy to the linguistic currency of Chinatown in order to access the best products. Perhaps she also knew from previous experiences that her husband would actually speak some *Hoisan-wa*, though he was denying it, and she wanted to draw the truth out of him.

This excerpt is one where speakers utilize role distance to enact their *Hoisan-wa* selves. The context is hypothetical but feasible (i.e., walking through San Francisco Chinatown), and it also points to appropriate domains of use. The exchange is humorous since there is incongruous use of *Hoisan-wa*, and one could argue that it is also nostalgic, since the speakers no longer frequent Chinatown any more, having moved to the suburbs. This collaborative construction of historiography opens up spaces where the group is able to reflect upon *Hoisan-wa* use in relevant ways and has the opportunity to choose a positive stance towards *Hoisan-wa*.

5 Discussion

In the examples above, I explored how humorous moments resulting in laughter elevate *Hoisan-wa*. They give it the status of a legitimate language resource in domains where speakers are engaged with register humor and enacting hypothetical situations where *Hoisan-wa* is used. In other words, by recontextualizing existing knowledge of *Hoisan-wa*, speakers are able to deploy it to their advantage to evoke laughter. And though it is likely that part of the humor draws upon existing stereotypes of the sounds and speakers of *Hoisan-wa* – thereby supporting the superiority theory, where people laugh at those whom they find inferior to themselves – we know that "humor can never be reduced to one single function, meaning, or purpose" (Kuipers 2011: 41–42). The examples I have shown suggest a movement beyond mere caricature to a linguistic display of multicompetence and symbolic competence, or knowledge stemming from "embodied experiences, emotional resonances, and moral imaginings" (Kramsch 2006: 251). The jokes, plays on words and humorous exchanges above show how people of Hoisan heritage undergo shifts in role distance from their English-speaking selves to their (occasional) *Hoisan-wa* speaking selves, calibrating *Hoisan-wa* utterances and reflecting upon their heritage in playful, hybrid and meaningful ways. Put differently, humor for these participants becomes a way of constructing symbolic competence of *Hoisan-wa*; they perform and construct Hoisan historicities with each

other by using humor. Through *Hoisan-wa* language use, they project a symbolic social message, one that positively acknowledges Hoisan heritage and where their bi/multilingual identities can coexist and interact peacefully. As Woolard eloquently describes the use of code-switching between Castilian and Catalan in comedy, "Neither one has had to disappear; they are both in use, side by side, but there is no battle line between them like that encountered in the real world" (1987: 117).

I contend that these humorous moments are part of a positive, counter-hegemonic affective stance that pushes back against established negative ideologies about *Hoisan-wa*. Because they disrupt mainstream conceptions of *Hoisan-wa* from the inside, albeit from very localized interactions, these moments can serve as wedges to pry open language ideologies and enable speakers to adopt a language-as-resource view (cf. Ruiz 1984) towards their heritage language. This act alone may not directly increase the number of *Hoisan-wa* speakers or "save" it from language loss or endangerment, but adopting positive ideologies through humor provides counter-narratives that challenge established ways of thinking and doing. This is reminiscent of the argument of language activists (Combs and Penfield 2012), who call for an environment where minority language speakers, no matter how marginalized, are able to use their language(s) proudly and without apology. Data from this paper provide a nuanced perspective into the role of humor in mediating bi/multiligual identities and expand our notions of how speakers of minoritized languages use different registers of linguistic resources to construct counter-hegemonic affect.

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