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Historical and Current Discourse and Its Impact on the Chinese American Community

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Introduction

As news of the COVID-19 virus began to circulate at the end of February 2020 and into March, we began to hear various statements linking the virus to specific peoples and groups. We heard phrases like “Chinese flu” and “foreign virus.” When it became clear that a pandemic was at hand, some of these statements became even more accusatory, incendiary, and blatantly racist, leading to physical acts of violence and verbal harassment. People avoided Chinatowns, and people of Asian descent all over the U.S. were targeted, spat on, and even beaten and told to “go back to your country,” even when many of these victims were born and raised in the U.S. During these moments we might have asked ourselves: What is the connection between language and social practice? How is language linked to ideology, and how does that link lead to positive and negative actions? This paper briefly explains these connections using some key ideas from applied linguistics and examples from Asian American history.

Some Definitions

Discourse is oftentimes defined as the language that lies beyond the sentence level that is linked to social practices. Certain groups of people can be characterized as using certain types of language (Blommaert, 2005). We see this type of “language to social practice” link most easily when observing communication within professional contexts. For example, teachers oftentimes use conventionalized “teacher talk” that is recognizable and acceptable in practice and contexts (e.g., classrooms, playgrounds); similarly, legal discourse is deployed in certain contexts (e.g., courtrooms, briefs) but its use in other settings (e.g., a casual dining restaurant) might seem out of place and awkward.

Ideas about when/where language use is acceptable are shaped by powerful institutions and regimented by people in power. These ideas or assumptions are “talked-into-being”, so much so that they are naturalized as common sense by institutional powers. These ideologies, or discourse models about language, “can do harm by implanting in thought and action unfair, dismissive, or derogatory assumptions about other people” (Gee, 2005, p. 72). For example, what we currently take for granted as “classroom language” is actually language use that is upheld by teachers, administrators, parents, and even other students, and normalized as being “proper” and “acceptable.” Meanwhile, other forms of language use, including home languages and non-standard varieties, might be discouraged and their use publicly denigrated. Discourse and social structures are in constant interaction with each other in what is called a “dialectal relationship.” While ideologies about language use circulate through coercion or consent by those with less power, these ideologies can also be dismantled and disrupted with the inclusion of minoritized perspectives. As such, as we look at how language operates, it is equally important to attend to both language and to action, to both the ways in which language is conventionalized and hierarchized and how language is used and is enacted in the everyday.

Some Historical Examples from Chinese American History

I now draw from some historical links where language use and naming were used to racialize and construct racial hierarchies. Medical historian Risse (2012) uses the example of the color “yellow” to designate people of Asian descent in the early 1800s when Chinese immigrants began to migrate to the U.S. for work. He argues that linking yellow to Asian people was far more than just a perceived skin color designation: it linked to the color of jaundice and perceived diseases that Asians were thought to have carried with them. Living in tight quarters

with little to no access to adequate sanitation, Chinese laborers in San Francisco Chinatown lived in horrible conditions and were thought to have carried airborne pathogens that linked them to disease. Their ethnic enclaves were thought of as dens of debauchery, disease, and death. Their diet of rice and little meat was oftentimes juxtaposed with the meat-heavy American diet, framing Chinese immigrants as weak and emasculated people who ate malodorous foods unfamiliar with the western palate. Their non-Christian religion further pitted them as “immoral” and foreign, and they could not enter public hospitals or health clinics for fear that they would contaminate “civilized” patients. Taken as a whole, Risse argues that these discourses and ideologies about modernity and cleanliness (i.e., a clean person does not smell) constructed early Chinese immigrants as both not-modern and not-clean. Thus, we see how current discourses of COVID-19 being called a “Chinese virus” or “kung-flu” do not operate within a vacuum; it is recycling and re-circulating historical discourses that continue to persist today, as people of Asian descent are being targeted for spreading disease. These discourses can have a stigmatizing impact.

Linking This to Contemporary Chinese American Discourses

I now use some contemporary Chinese American discourses about soup preparation to further illustrate how these historical discourses continue to resonate. Data come from 20 hours of recordings of Chinese Americans learning how to cook a cherished family soup from a family elder (more on this can be found in Ho, Fung, and Leung, 2020). Within these familial interchanges, there were ample excerpts where the family elder mentions restricting contagion and contamination as being integral to proper food preparation and cooking of soup. This came in the form of talking about “skimming the scum” of the soup so that the impurities would be diminished, scooping out the “dirty brown parts” and that a good soup was “clean” and “clear.” While one might argue these instructions are based in universal culinary practices, we argue the obsession for these family members to talk at length about cleanliness and eradicating what is considered “dirty” during food preparation before consumption comes also from the internalization of deficit stereotypes attributed to early Chinese Americans mentioned above. As such, the historical baggage current Asian/Chinese Americans carry with them as they navigate insults like “go back to your country” or “kung-flu” is very much part of the “forever foreigner” stereotype, wherein Asian Americans have to go at length to prove their “American-ness” or loyalty to the U.S. because their skin color designates them as foreigners in the U.S. We see here the very real effects of discourses impacting ideologies and how groups are adversely impacted by language and social practices. More investigation about the ways in which counter-narratives are being produced (for example, with the “I am not a virus” campaigns”) will also shed light on how discourses can be dismantled and disrupted.

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