

## Asian but Which Asian? Stylization among Onstage and Online Asian Diaspora Comedians

This paper compares the racial stylization in two types of performances by pan-Asian diaspora comedians (ADCs). Here, stylization is defined as the creative use of linguistic features to project stereotypical personas, simultaneously confirming and challenging stereotypes (Coupland, 2007). Previous literatures had widely explored onstage performances, in which ADCs perform for face-to-face audiences (e.g., Chun, 2004; Kim, 2021; Labrador, 2004). This study broadens the focus to include a popular yet understudied type: online performances where ADCs perform in user-generated videos on social media without in-person audiences. I argue that online performances encompass different strategies of racial stylization compared to onstage performances.

The data (online) preliminarily consist of the four most-viewed YouTube videos uploaded by two ADCs with the highest subscriptions, Steven He and Nigel Ng. Reference data (onstage) consist of Netflix specials by ADCs. First, I cross-check the linguistic features employed in performances with features associated with one or multiple language varieties in pan-Asia. The results reveal that online performances can involve “Asian accents” with a bricolage of features from multiple varieties. For example, although intended to be a Cantonese English-speaking persona (“Nigel Ng,” 2023), Uncle Roger’s pronunciation of “three” [ti] is associated with Malaysian English (Hashim, 2020), rather than Cantonese English, where the word would be pronounced as [fii] (Bolton et al., 2020). This exaggerated, inconsistent, and mixed use of linguistic features suggests that the accents often stylized by ADCs online cannot be linked to any native or heritage language or speech community. Second, I examine the discursive strategies surrounding racial stylization. The analysis shows that both onstage and online performances use stylization to perform an Asian persona with identity construction strategies such as pronouns, category terms (e.g., “The Asian way”), and *US-THEM* contrast. The difference lies in the fact that while online performances often construct a generalized pan-Asian identity in multi-character videos, onstage performances primarily construct an ethnic-specific identity with racial stylization.

The discussion reviews that onstage and online performances share similar strategies and outcomes in practicing racial stylizations. On the one hand, it reinforces the language ideologies that legitimize Asians as racial Others (Rosa & Flores, 2017). On the other hand, it challenges White hegemony by authenticating Asianness from the Asian perspective and decentering Whiteness (Coupland, 2007). This study acknowledges that stylization practices vary between individuals and the analysis could benefit from a broader survey. However, the analysis captures a relatively coherent practice of racial stylization on social media, which is different from the onstage performances. Due to the user-generated video format and globalization of technology, a more exaggerated language style, albeit unauthentic, can assist ADCs in quickly and humorously indexing a stereotypical identity to gain more followers within the Asian diaspora community in a shorter timeframe. This reliance on out-group stereotypes stylization corresponds to a detrimental sociolinguistic process that disregards and erases intra-group variations, thereby disempowering Asian voices (Gal & Irvine, 1995). Conversely, ethnic-specific stylization in onstage performances can construct a more specific and authentic identity, often representing a “shifting, contemporary Asian American identity” (Kim, 2021, p. 314), contextualized within longer narratives.

Addressing gaps in previous literature, this study concludes that the racial stylization in online performances often constructs a more general and unauthentic pan-Asian identity compared to onstage performances, which are more detrimental to the Asian diaspora community.

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