

Citation Information:

Zhu Hua and Li Wei (2016) “*Where are you really from?*”: *Nationality and Ethnicity Talk (NET) in everyday interactions*. In Zhu Hua & Claire Kramsch (eds.), *Symbolic power and conversational inequality in intercultural communication*, a special issue of *Applied Linguistics Review* 7(4), 449-470. DOI: 10.1515/applirev-2016-0020.

Applied Linguistics Review website: <https://www.degruyter.com/view/j/alr>

“Where are you really from?”: Nationality and Ethnicity Talk (NET) in everyday interactions

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Abstract

The article examines the significance of questions such as “where are you really from?” in everyday conversational interactions. Defining this kind of talk as nationality and ethnicity talk (NET), i.e. discourse that either explicitly or inexplicitly evokes one’s nationality or ethnicity in everyday conversation, the paper discusses what constitutes NET, how it works through symbolic and indexical cues and strategic emphasis, and why it matters in the wider context of identity, race, intercultural contact and power relations. The discussion draws on social media data including videos, blogs, on-line comments and the authors’ observations, and focuses on NET around Asian people living outside Asia. It argues that the question “where are you really from” itself does not *per se* contest immigrants’ entitlement. However, what makes a difference to the perception of whether one is an “interloper” - someone who is not wanted - is the “tangled” history, memory and expectation imbued and fuelled by power inequality.

Key words: Nationality and ethnicity talk, folk theory of race, stereotype

Introduction

“*Where are you from?*” is a question I like answering. “*Where are you really from?*” is a question I really hate answering... For Asian Americans, the questions frequently come paired like that... More than anything else that unites us, everyone with an Asian face who lives in America is afflicted by the perpetual foreigner syndrome. We are figuratively and even literally returned to Asia and ejected from America. (Wu 2002:79, italics original)

In the above quote, Frank Wu, the first Asian American law professor at Howard University Law School, shared his experience about the *perpetual foreigner syndrome*, a problem facing many Asian Americans in everyday social interactions. He made a point about how discrimination against a

group of people is instantiated through recurrent and seemingly innocent questions. In this article, we will focus on this kind of discourse and examine how questions such as “where are you really from?” in everyday talk could reflect people’s flawed assumptions about others, resulting in exclusion and marginalisation of certain social groups and contributing to banal racism, a kind of racism which is routinized and inconspicuous. We will refer to this kind of discourse as Nationality and Ethnicity Talk (NET), the discourse that either explicitly or implicitly evokes or orients to one’s national or ethnic membership. We will explore how people *do* nationality and ethnicity talk (NET) in everyday interactions and discuss what constitutes NET, how it works, and why it matters. We will draw on social media data including videos, blogs, on-line comments and the authors’ observations, and focus on NET around Asian people living outside Asia.

What is Nationality and Ethnicity Talk (NET)?

NET includes questions and comments which, frequently occurring in small talk, are aimed to establish, ascribe, challenge, deny or resist one’s ethnicity or nationality. The questions and comments range from direct ones (e.g. “Where are your people coming from?”, “When are you going back?”, “Is it as hot as this where you are from?”, “What is it like back home?”) to more subtle ones (e.g. “Your English is so good!”, “You must be used to cheese by now.”). Although we say that NET can be explicit or implicit, we do not mean that it is a matter of “either or” in a specific encounter. The degree of explicitness is very often a matter of interpretation, depending on who is speaking to whom, and whether there is a match between intended and perceived implicature.

NET is essentially an act of identity calibration and involves categorisation and positioning of self and others and stance-making. Sacks (1972) uses the notion of membership categorisation device (MCD) to explain how people order individuals into categories such as family, mother, student, British, etc, according to some conventional expectations about what constitute normative behaviour of a category. One category could be race and ethnicity, and we will discuss folk theory of race in the next section. When someone displays a certain set of features or carries out certain actions typically associated with a category (i.e. category-bound activities, in Sack’s terms), she would be cast as a member of that category. In some later studies, category-bound attributes are extended from activities and features to predicates such as rights, entitlements, obligations, knowledge, competences, etc (e.g. Hester and Eglin 1997). Through these category-bound attributes, activities and predicates, participants activate the necessary and relevant contextual features and make relevant certain aspects of their own identities or those of others, intentionally or inadvertently. The key for category-bound attributes to become identity markers lies in their symbolic and indexical value.

Parallel to the process of categorisation, participants also strategically take up subject positions and engage in acts of positioning themselves (Davies and Harré 1990) and stance-making. The latter is defined as “a public act by a social actor, achieved dialogically through overt communicative means, of simultaneously evaluating objectives, positioning subjects (self and others) and others, and aligning with other subjects, with respect to any salient dimension of the sociocultural field.” (Du Bois 2007: 163). Myers (2006) shows how the stance of conversation partners can make a difference to the way people answer the questions such as “where you are

from” and turn a routine response to a more extensive one which people either revise or construct collaboratively in subsequent exchanges.

The following analysis of a scripted conversation in a YouTube video clip “What kind of Asian are you?” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DWynJkN5HbQ>) illustrates how acts of categorisation, positioning and stance-making are played out during a conversation involving NET.

Selected transcription of the NET talk from YouTube video “What kind of Asian are you?”

Context: A white man (M) tried to strike a conversation with an Asian-looking young woman (W) who is doing exercise.

1 M: hi there

2 W: hi

3 M: nice day huh?

4 W: ya finally right?

5 M: (sounding surprised) where’re you from. your English is perfect

6 W: San Diego. we speak English there

7 M: (looks confused) ah no <whe: re:: are:: you:: fr::om>

8 W: well (.) I was born in Orange County but I never actually lived there=

9 M: =um I mean before that

10 W: before I was born

11 M: ya, well (.) where are your people from?

12 W: well (.) my great grandma was from Seoul

13 M: (delighted) Korean. I knew it. I was like she’s either Japanese or Korean but I was leaning more towards Korean

14 W: (in a flat tone) amazing

15 M: hh (bowing with hands together at front) gahm-sah-hahm-ni-da there’s a really good teriyaki barbecue place near my apartment. I actually really like kimchi.

(Transcription conventions: = no gap between two turns; < > talk produced slowly and deliberately; : lengthening of the preceding sound; (.) a very short untimed pause; word: speaker emphasis)

In the video, the man, who was surprised by the woman’s English, began to look for the answers he was hoping for by asking questions one by one: “where are you from?”, “before that?”, and “where are your people from?”. The clip also contains implicit NET. His comment “Your English is perfect” in Turn 5, despite being a compliment, positioned the Asian-looking woman

as a non-native English speaker, therefore a foreigner, someone who does not belong to an English-speaking country like the US. The NET talks are accompanied by his further stance-making in Turn 7 through his speech adjustments and rendition of patronising ‘foreigner talk’ (Ferguson 1975) when he went out of his way to slow down and emphasise every syllable in his question of “where are you from”. In Turn 13, he was “thinking aloud” and talked about his categorisation which seemed to rely upon the woman’s physical appearance. In the last turn, the guy was trying to display his cultural assumptions about Korea. He started the utterance with a bow which is more stereotypical of Thai rather than Korean style, accompanied by a tokenistic (Thurlow 2010), but completely out of the context, use of a Korean phrase, “gahm-sah-hahm-ni-da”, meaning *thank you*. He then referred to a teriyaki barbecue place and made a comment about “Kimchi”. Needless to say, these cultural assumptions and references are superficial and essentialised.

The woman made several attempts to resist the man’s positioning and in doing so, displayed her stance. She used the first person plural pronoun “we” in Turn 6 to depersonalise the matter. This is in contrast with the emphasis on “your people”, a plural address term used by the man in Turn 11. In Turn 8, she ignored the man’s ascription of non-native English speaker/foreigner who needs to be spoken to slowly, provided an account of her connection with Orange County in an attempt to routinize the conversation. She also employed the discourse marker “well” in Turns 8 & 12 to indicate her reluctance to be drawn into this kind of discussion. Her flat tone accompanying the word “amazing” in Turn 14 displayed her stance of resistance.

Whilst this is a constructed example, possibly to show the performers’ own experience with banal racism in the US, online occurrences of similar examples suggest that NET of this kind is by no means rare. Indeed, there is evidence that it is part of the everyday experiences of people who may look different from the perceived majority of the population of a particular place.

Why does NET matter? Folk theories of race and identity

Despite growing acceptance of racial equality in post-industrialised societies, NET of the above kind reflects people’s hidden and flawed folk theories of race, reproduces discourse of banal racism and results in exclusion and marginalisation of certain social groups.

The term ‘folk model’ is introduced by cognitive anthropologist, D’Andrade (1987), to distinguish everyday understandings of the world from scientific theories based on research findings. Borrowing the term, Hill (2008) coins the concept of ‘folk theory of race’ to describe everyday assumptions that people have about race and ethnicity. These everyday assumptions could manifest themselves in common conversations such as “It’s a Black thing—you would not understand” unpicked by Markus & Moya (2010), or in a flippant comment by the man in the previous transcription “I knew it. I was like she’s either Japanese or Korean. But I was leaning more towards Korean”. Because the folk models or theories are often taken for granted and, on some occasions, almost invisible to those who apply them and/or those at the receiving end of them, people tend to use them to “interpret the world without a second thought” (Hill 2008:5). They are also pervasive. As we will see in the analysis of on-line commentaries in the following section, it is something we all hold - people of Colour and White people, dominant majorities and subordinate minorities, academics and lay people alike. Despite their inconspicuous nature,

folk theories of race often carry with them traces of, as well as feed in, larger ideological constructs about race and ethnicity circulating in society.

The point we would like to make here is that many folk theories of race constitute, or at least contribute to, the discourse of banal racism, a kind of racism which is routinised and inconspicuous, nevertheless, reproducing and reifying differences and resulting in Othering. Drawing on the works by Hall (1996, 1997) and Riggins (1997), Jaworski & Coupland (2005: 672) distinguish between identity construction based on difference and contrast and Othering which occurs “when an individual or a group of people is denied a clearly defined status, ... when an individual or a group of people is designated as ‘anomalous’, ‘peculiar’, or ‘deviant’, or is objectified, stereotyped, naturalized, or essentialised”. The consequences of Othering are well discussed in the field of social psychology and emerging works on linguistic discrimination. For example, Cheryan and Monin (2005) proposed the term ‘identity denial’ to describe the type of threat to identity that was inflicted on the recipients through the question “where are you really from?”. They surveyed 167 students in Stanford University; 34.2% Asian Americans reported being often misperceived as either ‘from another country’ or ‘a non-native English speaker’ or both, the highest percentage among four groups (only 7.1% of White Americans, 10.0% of African Americans and 24% of Hispanic Americans). In their second study, participants in experimental conditions were approached by a white American experimenter who asked the question “do you speak English?” first before giving a task of listing as many American TV shows from the 80s as one could remember. Compared with the control group who did the same task but without being asked the question about their English first, the Asian Americans in the experimental condition were found to spend marginally more time generating shows than the white American participants. Taking these findings together, Cheryan and Monin argued that the fact that Asian Americans were denied their group identity as American and seen as ‘less American’ at many levels has consequences: “Having the credibility of their American identity questioned on a daily basis ... is tantamount to questioning their credibility as persons” (p.728). In her book, Rosina Lippi-Green (1997/2012) gives some snapshots of the consequences on Asian Americans, referred to as ‘unassimilable races’ by the American Supreme Court in the 1920s, in everyday interactions. For example, some native English speakers claim to hear Asian accents that are not there when they see Asian Americans, a phenomenon she calls ‘accent hallucination’.

The growing amount of research on identity in mobility in sociolinguistics, language education and diaspora studies in recent years has further revealed unprecedented complexities of identity and challenged many taken-for-granted notions associated with race and ethnicity in the context of power hierarchies. Harris and Rampton (2003) gave some examples of the options people can take in doing identities. They include: “embracing and cultivating their ethno-cultural/linguistic legacy”, “trying to downplay and drop it as a category that is relevant to them”, “drawing attention to the different ethnicities of other people”, “taking on someone else's ethnicity”, or “creating a new one and developing hybrid and new ethnicities” (p.5). The authors also argued that developing new hybrid ethnicities is clearly a very complex process and often provokes intense argument about “authenticity, entitlement and expropriation”. Bucholtz & Hall (2004) propose three pairs of ‘identity tactics of intersubjectivity’ (p. 382) to describe the local, situational and improvised discourse practice in negotiating the social relations and creating

identities. These are adequation and distinction (asserting similarity or differences), authentication and denaturalisation (claiming realness or an incredible or non-genuine identity), and authorisation and illegitimation (legitimizing or denying an identity through authority or institutional power). They point out that these tactics are often underpinned or motivated by political agendas. For example, the tactic of distinction may be a mechanism of domination to reinforce hierarchy and stratification or used by those with little access to power to resist being assimilated into dominant groups. These notions are particularly helpful in unpacking the inner working of identification.

Terms such as hyphenatedness, hybridity, or double belonging, are often used to describe multiple identities that second or third-generation of immigrants, in particular, are associated with, do not imply that there is a “harmonious fusion or synthesis of multiple identities (Ang 2001: 195) or a “simple blend of disparate cultural elements” (Frello 2015: 197). Instead, they need to be conceptualised as displacement and therefore enable researchers to focus on “contestations of established power hierarchies, narratives and identities” (ibid). Some studies show that identification is closely linked to political struggle and inequality. For example, in her study of (il)legitimate blendings, Fello (2015) demonstrates how the legitimacy of the blended identities of two migrants living in Denmark was positioned differently by the programme hosts and their audiences in televised debates, due to the politically sensitive nature of the issues under debate.

What do people really think of NET: commentaries, stance and folk theories of race

So far we have discussed what constitutes NET, how it works and why it matters. In this section, we examine on-line commentaries in response to an opinion article about NET by Ariane Sherine, a comedian, journalist and writer. We are interested in the stances people take in their response and what folk theories of race the commentaries unearth. The article and commentaries are posted in the *Guardian*'s on-line opinion column, 'Comment is free'. For this on-line column, once an opinion piece is published, readers can join in discussion by posting their comments for a short period of time (4 days for the opinion article we examine in this paper). Commenting requires a simple registration process. One can 'recommend' a comment or comment on other users' comments. The blog article we want to discuss here was posted on Wednesday 3 March 2010 with the headline “It may not be racist, but it’s a question I’m tired of hearing”. In the article, Sherine started by talking about “the Conversation” she had for the 3,897th time. The Conversation was recorded by herself along with her interpretation of the stranger’s stance and thinking process in the form of “translation”.

“The Conversation”

Stranger: Where are you from? [Translation: You look a bit brown. Why are you brown?]

Me: London.

Stranger: No, where are you really from? [Translation: You are clearly telling me untruths. Brown people do not come from London.]

Me: London.

Stranger (exasperated): No, where are your parents from? [Translation: Now you're just being obtuse.]

Me: Africa and America.

Stranger (confused): Erm ... so where are your family from, like, back in the day? [Translation: People who come from Africa and America do not look like you.]

Me: Iran, India, Africa, America and England.

Stranger (relieved): India and Iran! Do you ever go back?

(The full article is available at <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2010/mar/03/racist-question-brown-answer-curious>).

Having lived in London all her life and speaking English with a London accent, Sherine made it clear that she was not embarrassed about her ethnic background and acknowledged that “people with a different appearance often seem more interesting than those who look everyday”. Yet, she found it hard to “go back to somewhere you have never been”. She was reluctant or even resentful to enter the Conversation,

...partly down to exasperation at people thinking I'm less British than them because I'm brown; but it's mainly down to extreme boredom. The rundown of my convoluted four-continent-spanning genealogy takes ages unless I lie, and I've started to deliver it in a funereal voice more monotonous than Tiger Woods's public apology.

Here, Sherine embedded her proposition “people think I’m less British than them because I’m brown” in a statement about her reluctance, thus hedging her claim of racism and perhaps also trying to avoid drawing too much attention to it. This seems to be consistent with the way she softened her stance in the article title “it may not be racist’ where a modal verb was used to tone down the firmness of the claim. In a second half of the article, Sherine took up a mocking approach and talked about her “solution” by providing extraordinarily lengthy and detailed account of the migration trajectory of her maternal ancestors dated back to before AD700. Her article solicited 1,420 comments, significantly higher than other articles which usually attract 200-500 comments.

The first couple of comments posted after the article was published were removed by the moderator apparently for failing to comply with the community standards. The next available comments were light-hearted and aligned with Sherine’s sense of humour and mocking tone, e.g. “nice to meet you, Ariane (no questions) :-)” ; “With a bit more padding, you could turn the business card into a book. Then beat them with it after they're done reading”. But soon more explicitly disagreeing comments began to appear. Some people strongly believed that the Conversation was just a normal conversation opening strategy; people were curious about other’s roots. Their disapproval of the issue raised by Sherine ranges from light-hearted tease to outright criticism and rude rejection. One reader named *PhilipD* commented, “*To an extent*, people are *always* curious about background.” He hedged his proposition of disagreement with the phrase “to an extent” while at the same time inserting an adverb of frequency (“always”) to strengthen the degree of certainty. Another reader, *theGus*, posted his/her in-your-face criticism: “So let me

get this straight - you're a shameless self-publicist and someone who easily takes offense. What a winning combo!"

After the first few unfavourable comments, however, more sympathetic comments began to appear, with many people coming forward to share similar stories of how their claim to a particular identity (e.g. affiliation to the place where they are born, grew up, or educated) or native language speaker right was being challenged by other people. Many people shared the feeling of frustration, marginalisation and exclusion evoked, created and reinforced through the Conversation. They believe that they are singled out because of their skin colour, accent, or their names. They feel that their identities are challenged and denied through the Conversation. In the following comment, the reader with the name of *fireflower* confirmed her personal connection to the topic and shared her frustration about being constantly reminded of having a different skin colour, despite her effort to integrate at work. She gave further examples of NET that centred around her ethnicity and assumed associated social and cultural practices such as Bollywood, curry and arranged marriage, which made her feel "pigeonholed" and "undervalued".

"I know exactly what you mean Ariane, some people just can't see past the things that make you different e.g. skin colour

At work I'm often asked questions about myself but it almost always relates to how I'm different even though I always try my best to integrate

"So your favourite music must be Bollywood", "your mum must make a fantastic curry", your parents must be putting pressure on you to get married by now" are just a few examples... it's very frustrating. Makes you feel pigeonholed and undervalued and not only that creates an "us and them" situation" (posted by *fireflower*)

Although two opposing views emerged during the course of discussion, the comments which critiqued Sherine's views are more frequent and have higher recommendation ratings than those which sympathised with her position. The top 10 highly recommended comments apart from one all contain outright rejection of Ariane's views, suggesting popularity of the critiquing view.

On-line commentaries, as Walton and Jaffe (2011: 288) point out, is an increasingly familiar genre "that puts stance-taking at the centre of the activity". When participants make comments, they are not only positioning themselves with regard to the opinion piece and uptaking their stance for or against previous comments, but also introducing new stances and creating "the textual context for the entry and reading of each new comment". As researchers, we are interested in what forms of stance alignment and non-alignment the commentaries take, following the analytical framework of Walton and Jaffe's (2011) and what positioning might tell us about the commentators' folk theories of race and ethnicity. In our analysis, we will use s/he where the commentator's gender is not clear. We also follow the way the commentators' virtual identities are presented on-line where we can. We do not capitalise the first letters of names if they appear in lowercase on-line, although we use italics in the analysis to differentiate them from other texts.

Non-alignment stance

Several types of non-alignment stance are evident in the commentaries. One is to disalign with Sherine's stance by questioning her credibility and trivialising her proposition. Below are some of the examples which employed this stance, including the top two highly recommended comments.

"I always thought that Guardian journalists assumed that when asked "where they were from" the questioner meant "Oxford or Cambridge?" (posted by *Shinsei*, with the highest recommendation rating of 1109)

"So basically you get chatted up a lot, by people who suddenly don't know what to say and ask you an inane question. Not surprising really." (posted by *MuzzydeMontfort*, with the second highest recommendation rating of 758)

"Why are you telling us? We didn't ask what your heritage was.

That guy who asked you was doing so clumsily but it was still a pretty innocent line of questioning. That you might be less British because of your skin colour is a nonsense; you're attributing a view onto this man that he may or may not have had." (posted by *maclarkson*)

In the above examples, *Shinsei* chose to make a joke about Guardian journalists' prestigious education backgrounds. While the comment might be light-hearted, s/he stepped aside the race issue raised by Sherine and consequently trivialised it. *MuzzydeMontfort* gendered the matter and reduced the Conversation as petty "chatting up lines". *maclarkson* did not see the point of Sherine's complaint, and insisted on good intentions of the question (i.e. the innocence of the stranger) in his/her criticism. He echoed *MuzzydeMontfort's* move and gendered the issue by assuming the stranger (which is a gender-neutral term) is a man and blamed Sherine for attributing a (presumably wrong) view.

Another type of non-alignment stance which emerged from the comments is to challenge the truth value of Sherine's proposition that the Conversation reflects racism. These comments emphasise that there was nothing wrong with the question, because a) it happened to readers themselves before; b) it is only small talk and a standard conversation opener; c) people are curious; and d) it is not racism. In a comment with a very high recommendation rating, *fearistheminderkiller*, a self-identified white person, pointed out that people are just simply interested and what Sherine encountered was triggered by people's curiosity about "interesting" and "unusual" things such as an unusual surname. S/he claimed that "far better that everyone be interested, and interesting, than we all remain closed up frightened of anything outside the perceived norm". The way s/he used the phrase "the majority of white people in Britain", described her/himself as 'white' and talked about "the perceived norm" indicates that s/he considered whiteness is unmarked in Britain and constitutes the norm. Her/his full comments are provided below.

"I don't buy this. People are interested, simple as. You say so yourself - the colour of your skin makes it a little more obvious that your heritage isn't 1000 years of European peasantry (sic) as is the case for the majority of white people in Britain, and that is why you get curiosity.

I'm white, but as soon as people hear my unusual surname the next question is always on my heritage. Far better that everyone be interested, and interesting, than we all remain closed up frightened of anything outside the perceived norm.

Funny article, though.” (posted by *fearistheminderkiller*, with recommendation rating of 556)

Several readers explicitly denied racism invoked in the NET. *Mats000* told his own story of asking someone where they were from, but getting it all wrong. He denied being a racist (“I’m not a racist”), reminiscent of the “denial of racism” discourse critiqued by van Dijk (1992).

“...I recently had dinner in an Indian restaurant with a bunch of people. The guy opposite looked Indian. I asked him: So are you from India? I had no bad intent and I’m not a racist. I got a very irritated response. I’m from London and third generation British citizen. It continued downhill from there. I found his arrogance and smugness unbearable. Maybe this guy has a problem with his ethnic diversity but that is not my problem.

So does the columnist think the question of origin are non-PC. Is it like asking about sexual preference, IQ level, or why the person has a big nose. These topics are typically considered inpolite (sic) in causal (sic) conversation. Should we now add questions about ethnicity (sic) to this list?” (posted by *Mats000*)

Interestingly, none of readers taking on non-alignment stance refuted the existence of NET. In fact they argue that it happens to them for a good reason (curiosity, interest, small talk, etc) and it is a normal conversation practice. Below are some examples.

“People ask where other people are from all the time, it's small talk and showing an interest. I get asked about where I'm from by Londoners too - Yorkshire is just as exotic to some. (posted by *unexceptional*)

“To be fair, some people ARE curious. I've asked friends about their ethnicity before. ... You should be proud to have such a diverse background, and flattered that 3,897 people found you interesting enough to ask about you.” (posted by *monders*)

“Your translations sound a bit paranoid, don't they? It sounds to me like people are just trying to make polite small-talk. In general, Europeans take an interest in foreign countries and like to hear about them, and lots of ethnic people are proud of their provenance.” (posted by *FelixKrull*)

Some readers used a diversity argument to position them as someone who may have a more reflexive awareness about diversity than Sherine and therefore more authority in their non-alignment stance. For example, *Skiamakbos* states that nobody is “completely English” and even his wife “whose family name dates back to Bede the Venerable, has a bit of this & a bit of that”. His main focus, however, was on whether it is ok to ask where one is from rather than the issue of entitlement (whether brown people are authentic or legitimate British) as Sherine has made it clear in her positioning article.

“Nobody's "completely English" - even my wife, whose family name dates back to Bede the Venerable, has a bit of this & a bit of that. It's what makes the UK an interesting place to be, & how we got our culture. I was born in Birmingham, but I identify as Anglo-Irish (I'm Irish from my dad's family & my maternal grandmother's) & I'm quite happy & proud to be who I am. I guess it could get tedious to be asked all the time, but as previous commenters have said, it

probably just means you're getting chatted up by guys who get nervous & tongue-tied & make inane conversational gambits. It's not that different from "Um... nice weather we're having, eh?" (posted by *Skiamakbos*)

In *Scamander's* comment we see employment of several stances: attacking Sherine's personality ("not all of them have the arrogance you seem to", "one of those people who loves to complain about getting attention"); challenging the truth value of her proposition by questioning her logic ("This doesn't mean that they think that you aren't British"); and emphasising the prevalent (and enjoyable) nature of this kind of talk ("Many I've spoken to actually seem to enjoy talking about their lineage". The use of evaluative stance marker ("incredibly rude"), hyperbole and sarcasm ("the great crime") and forced choice question at the end all lend force to the strength of his/her disalignment.

"The great crime that the article reveals is that someone dared to ask about your heritage. Not out of a judgmental standpoint but out of interest. This doesn't mean that they think that you aren't British, you'll be surprised to learn that plenty of people born in Britain who aren't white. You do realise this don't you? You know that you aren't the only one?"

Granted, not all of them have the arrogance you seem to. Many I've spoken to actually seem to enjoy talking about their lineage and the varying stories that accompany. I've an unusual surname and have had people mispronounce it all my life - strangely I don't berate them for it - often they ask me what the correct pronunciation (sic).

So either you are incredibly rude or are one of those people who loves to complain about getting attention. Which one is it?" (posted by *Scamander* with recommendation rating of 617)

There are numerous folk theories of race and ethnicity that surface in the comments. In the above cited quotes, *fearistheminderkiller* made an assumption that the majority of white people in Britain are of European ancestry (white race = European lineage). This seems to contradict *Skiamakbos* who states "Nobody's completely English" and later *Scamander's* view "plenty of people born in Britain who aren't white" (British = diverse origin). Some folk theories are unfounded, for example, the statement made by *MiskatonicUniversity* that "People's pigmentation is related to where their immediate ancestors came from - pale people originate in northern latitudes, darker people in southern zones - both are an adaptation to solar radiation." (race = pigmentation) Some are patronising and reify the divide between us and others: "we forgive foreigners a lot of things because they're foreigners, ...we don't expect them to know the same things the locals know." (race = superiority) (by *behemoth*).

Alignment stance

There are fewer comments aligning with Sherine in stance compared with the number of objecting comments. The alignment stances takes several forms, including providing new versions of NET, sharing their similar personal experience, confirmed the prevalence of the prototypical exchange beyond just from white to non-white and making meta and reflexive comments about race/racism. Many commentators introduced some mocking or hilarious variations of NET. Two of our favourite ones are cited below. In *Missbrown's* version, the stranger was not only insistent, but also selective in hearing what s/he wanted to hear and keen

to confirm what s/he wanted to confirm: “so you’re polish”. In *techtuck’s rendition*, the stranger questioned who is or is not entitled to English names like Ian.

“Miss, where are you from?
England
But where are your *parents* from?
Erm... England
So where are your grandparents from?
Three of them are from England, one is from Poland
Oh, so you're Polish” (posted by *Missbrown*)

“Stranger: So what's your name?
Me: Ian
Stranger: Yeah, but what's your real name?
Me: It's really Ian
Stranger: No, but on your birth certificate
Me: That's what it says on my birth certificate:
Stranger: ... no... .. really?” (posted by *techtuck*)

A number of readers with Asian connections shared their own personal experience and feeling of frustration, exclusion and marginalisation inflicted by NET. *supersweet*, who was “half white, half Chinese” and born in England, spoke English as native language and got top grades in A Level English Literature and Advanced Extension Award exams (which are the British university entrance exams), found his/her native English speaker right constantly challenged by the NET about his/her good English.

“I get similar questions. I am half white, half Chinese and born in England, speak English as my mother tongue and sound rather very home counties. ...I am not fully white, so can see why they ask, but I just find such questions frustrating. Sometimes I am asked, "Wow, you speak really good English. How long have you been over here?"

I don't quite know what to say to this...since birth? Might I add that I got top grades in A Level Eng lit and the AEA?” (posted by *supersweet*)

Two folk theories are in operation here: for the stranger, native English speakers are synonymous to being white (race = native English speaker); for *supersweet*, a good education background in particular with language and literature is a benchmark of being a British (race = education). Likewise, *weltschmerz42* challenged the folk theory of race = skin colour and lamented on how his/her “yellow” skin colour became the most salient identity marker despite his/her parents and grandparents’ roots, having Smith as his/her last name and his/her working class native English accent. As someone with a mix of Scottish and Malaysian Chinese, born and raised in Scotland and living in English, YZZY found his/her experience was even worse, since people found it “amusing to see a non-white person with a Scottish accent”.

“YESSS!!! I love this article. I get it all the time as well and I feel exactly the same...

I am "Chinese" because of the way I look? and furthermore, expected to know the language and follow all the Chinese cultural traditions? ...

Even "my parents and grandparents were from Switzerland" is not enough - it's like "No, you couldn't possibly have gotten that peculiar pigmentation there. Where are you really from? Oh that yellow country! ... Even if my last name was Smith and I spoke like a working class Scouser, it's all about my colour because it's different. Different from what, pray?" (posted by *weltschmerz42*)

“Being a bit brown in London? With an English accent? Luxury, luxury. You've got it easy; at least people don't find it amusing to see a non-white person with a southern english accent... you should try being a mix of Scottish and Chinese, born and raised in Scotland and living in England

The usual conversation consisting of the remarks/questions in some form or other... [look of surprise] oh, your accent doesn't match your face... so where are you from (Fife), no I mean originally (oh, sorry, I was born in Dundee)... no I mean your family, originally (my dad's Chinese)... do you ever go back to China (well, he's actually from Malaysia)... I suppose it's not too different to your, or many other people's stories.” (posted by *YZYZ*)

Among those commentaries confirming the prevalence of NET, further folk theories emerge. Some comments suggested that NET could be very common in some immigrant countries. According to *EmpsonSeven*, “If you live in one of the 'new world' societies like Australia, Canada, America and even if you look exactly like them, they still want to know where you're from!” A few people commented that white people with accents were also likely to be subject to the Conversation (race =accent). *Spinage* explains how his/her North American accent drew people's attention all the times, despite the fact that s/he lived in London most of his/her life:

“...And it doesn't only happen to brown people here in London where I've lived most of my life. The relatively very short and long-ago periods of my life I've spent in North America have left me with an accent that people often take either for Irish or English West Country, and I often get asked about it, which often leads to discussion of my English-American background, why I'm here rather than there etc. ...” (posted by *Spinage*)

Several commentators (e.g. *Xiaomoogle*, *65percent*) reported their stories of living in Asia as someone who did not look Asian, further proving that NET could happen to anyone. Below are some examples.

“So I moved to China where people assume I'm Italian, French, Swedish or sometimes Russian, but never British.... Once my nationality is confirmed, I am told about British greats such as David Beckham and the Queen, or asked why we went to war with Iraq

Ah, yes, indeed, all very common questions from Chinese people. I never find that bothersome - but 10 years of hearing the phrase 'lao wai' ['foreigner'] directed at me several times a day, even in 'advanced' Shanghai, did begin to niggle. I took to looking directly back at the person and saying 'lao zhong' [which sort-of means 'Chinese person'.” (posted by *Xiaomoogle*)

“It's (calling someone 'laiwai') certainly not disrespectful. But it's said in the manner of pointing out something curious, like a flamingo in the high street...

I was once eating a sandwich by the side of West Lake (a famed beauty spot in the Chinese city of Hangzhou) and a group of tourists (they were countryside people, to guess by their garb, and thus would seldom have seen real live Caucasians) paused behind me.

Every time I made a move they would comment on it. 'Look! He's eating his sandwich!' 'He's turning a page of his book!' and so on. I found that rather endearing, to be sure; but to hear it every single day in the big city got a little tiresome. Though only a little.” (posted by *65percent*)

Xiaomoogle, apparently British, talked about his experience of being treated as “*lao wai*”, meaning “foreigner” in China and how people began to make cultural references once they found out he was British. He also wrote about his strategy of “turning the tab by calling the other party “*lao zhang*”, a coined word mimicking the word “*lao wai*” and meaning “old/respectable Chinese”. Similar to *Xiaomoogle*, *65percent* shared the experience of being singled out as “a flamingo in the high street” in China. Although s/he found the experience “endearing”, s/he also admitted that the practice could be “tiresome”.

Some readers made reflexive comments about the kind of racism NET entails. *Oteshabanna* discussed how curiosity can “teeter” into a different kind of racism from the racism “in the abusive sense”.

“It is like you read my mind. I am half japanese and I have this conversation ALL THE TIME and am really bored of it! It's fine to be curious about someone's background, but when you say you're from London and people don't accept it and push you for a different answer, that's when it teeters into racism. It may not be racism in the abusive sense, but I think making assumptions about people based on the colour of their skin or shape of their eyes is a form of it.” (posted by *oteshabanna*)

Another reader, *Leonidas777*, combined several alignment stances together and displayed reflexivity. He started by saying that the problem is not a uniquely brown problem, but happens elsewhere. He talked about his personal experience as a westerner who was born and grown up in Hong Kong and reflected on racism. Several folk theories of race surface in his comments. These include: a “permanent” Hong Kong resident somehow must be of Chinese ancestry; many Hong Kong Chinese residents hold passport of other countries for various political, educational and practical reasons rather than as a matter of allegiance; and self-perceived superiority of HK Chinese over those on the mainland.

“...this is not a uniquely brown problem.

I'm a westerner born and raised in Hong Kong. You can imagine the look of incredulity when I tell people my origins - often searching for a glint of sarcasm in my tone. I've also been asked if my parents are Chinese.

However, this doesn't bother me in the slightest. What irks me more is people in Hong Kong refer to me as a foreigner - no matter what. Not only this, but the “permanent” right of abode here has a certain racial caveat that one must be of Chinese ancestry.

Therefore, all westerners are viewed as more transient additions to the community who eventually lose their right to live here. Also bare (sic) in mind that a large % of well-off HK Chinese, in fact, hold passports of other countries (mostly Britain, Canada, but not so much US since they would be required to pay tax), including politicians and government servants. The reason that they hold these passports is not only as a contingency, should the red army suddenly march across the border, but for ease of travel and education should their children choose to study there. They often have no other link to the country who's (sic) passport they hold and view them more as a commodity.

Racism is more institutionalized and culturally accepted here e.g. a Pakistani will find it hard to open a bank account due to anti-terrorism laws.

Not only other races, but amongst the Chinese, HK Chinese generally perceive themselves to be superior to those on the mainland.” (posted by *Leonidas777*)

Stances over stances

As Walton and Jaffe (2011: 293) comment, “stances are not monologic but, rather, are constructed dialogically and intertextually, over time, across turns at talk, texts in a sequence, and so forth”. The on-line commentaries create space for the commentators to engage with and negotiate each other’s stance. Readers can acknowledge, ratify, revoke or simply ignore others’ stance.

contractor000:

“*HeywoodJ*:

Reading your comment, I think “*Why the comment?*”

If you find the subject tedious, you might find it more rewarding to read other pieces no?

I myself find it rather fascinating, and a nicely written piece. And in particular, one interesting thing is those people who don't seem to grasp the issues

- Of empathy and politeness on the one hand (*being inquisitorial*)
- Of negating someone's identity (saying “*You raen't (sic) a Londoner*”)

So *TanyaVanOsch*, people have feelings, human society has a tangled history that strongly affects those feelings.

And we have something called “Empathy” to stop us making people uncomfortable, in particular people we don't know.

Think about it, it's not so difficult if you stop assuming you know what they think... and instead, make no presumption about how other people should feel.”

In the above extracts, *contractor000* uptook the non-alignment stance by two readers. In response to *HeywoodJ* who asserted that Sherine made a big fuss over something trivial (“why does it merit an article?”), s/he refuted by challenging *HeywoodJ*’s right to speak for everyone and unpicking the underlying issue beneath the NET, i.e. differences between being curious and negating someone’s identity. To *TanyaVanOsch* who accused Sherine of being embarrassed about the 3rd

world heritage, *contractor000* asks him/her to stop making assumption about other, as “human society has a tangled history that strongly affects those feelings.”

The further engagement and negotiation of stance was evident in a subsequent post by *HeywoodJ*.

***HeywoodJ*:**

@contractor000

re. "Why the comment?"

It's a comments board, it's sort of there to make a comment.

re. If you find the subject tedious, you might find it more rewarding to read other pieces no?

Correct, there were other pieces I found more rewarding.

re. make no presumption about how other people should feel.

I agree. I would never presume that asking a person with brown skin where their parents or grandparents were from, should make them feel that I considered them "less British," so I see no harm in asking.

HeywoodJ recast *contract000*'s stances one by one. He emphasised the legitimacy of his comments (“It’s a comments board, it’s sort of there to make a comment”), took *contractor000*'s rhetorical question literally (“Correct, there were other pieces I found more rewarding.”) and appropriated *contractor000*'s logic for his own stance (“I agree. I would never presume that...”)

Conclusion

As Markus and Moya (2010: x) argue in their review of the eight common conversations about race, “Race is not something that people have or are, but rather a set of actions that people do... Doing race always involves creating groups based on perceived physical and behavioural characteristics, associating differential power and privilege with these characteristics, and then justifying the resulting inequalities”. Language, as a powerful and influential social agent in constructing social relationship (Goffman 1967; Foucault 1981; Bakhtin 1986; Bourdieu 1991), is exactly one of the actions whereby people do race, among other things. In nationality and ethnicity talk (NET), as analysed in this paper, we see not only the mechanisms of construction of social relationship, but also an act of symbolic power play, whereby people subjectively position and calibrate us vs. others by questioning their entitlement, authenticity and legitimacy – all central notions to identity and identification.

What seems to transpire from the analysis of the commentators’ stances in the *Guardian*'s column is the predicament when it comes to peoples’ views on NET with regard to its implicature, intention and appropriateness. NET is prevalent in the sense that it does not just happen to people of Asian origins living abroad or from the whites to the non-whites—similar experiences are also reported among many people who are not Asian, but different from the local or the norm in one way or another. There are people (including some people with Asian

backgrounds) who do not see any problems with these questions and in fact, they are proud of their ancestry and eager to talk about their differences. However, what is significant is that for some groups of people (e.g. people of Asian origins living outside Asia), the conversation is likely to be met with resentment and regarded as act of exclusion and marginalisation. One commentator (i.e. *ChinaBounder*) made a spot-on comment on how the same question may be fine with others, but may become a racist question when applied to a different group. S/he said, “When I'm in China I'm asked the question all the time and never feel it's racisty (sic). But I would feel I was being somehow racisty (sic) to ask a SE-Asian (South-eastern) appearance person that question if I met them in the UK - like I was suggesting they were an *interloper* in the country”.

The question “where are you really from” itself may not *per se* contest immigrants’ entitlement. What makes a difference to the perception whether one is an “interloper” - someone who is not wanted or considered not to belong - is the “tangled” history, memory and expectation imbued and fuelled by power inequality, the central theme of this special issue (see Introduction to this special issue). The seemingly harmless question puts the addressee instantly at a disadvantage and opens up the possibility of appearing to be over-sensitive and touchy. But the fact is that it occurs more often to someone who looks “out of place”. For the visible minorities, their identities are often ascribed and “racialized”, based on their physical appearance, and then placed in a “devalued” racial group outside the dominant group (Giddens 2001). The truth is that racial/ethnic hierarchies, where racial groups are put in a system of stratification with some racial groups believed to be superior or inferior to other racial groups, matter and still exist today (Song 2004). We are dealing with banal yet rampant racism against Asians. Many of the folk theories of race and ethnicity unearthed in the comments posted in the on-line discussion forum, irrespective of their stances, are alarmingly flawed, showing biases and superiority towards others. Precisely because these visible minorities feel discriminated against in general, they impute to the question “where do you really come from?” an intention to challenge their entitlement to the place where they live and to having an authentic and legitimate identity despite visible differences.

We end the article with a link to two video clips on *youtube*, one about Black Americans’ experiences in China, and the other about the experiences of Chinese and East Asian people who are born outside Asia and who do not speak Chinese when they visit China.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CqtS3hSwq3o>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8p-NxcM0dKQ>

They serve as a reminder that folk theories of race and ethnicity and banal racism of the kind exposed in NET may be practised everywhere in the world and the presumed association between language and race/ethnicity is an integral part of the story that needs more attention from applied linguists.

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