

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 413 772

FL 024 882

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TITLE Interactions of Identity: Indochinese Refugee Youths, Language Use, and Schooling.  
PUB DATE 1997-03-00  
NOTE 23p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Chicago, IL, March 24-28, 1997).  
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)  
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.  
DESCRIPTORS Academic Achievement; Articulation (Education); Asian Americans; Elementary School Students; Grade 6; \*Indochinese; Intermediate Grades; \*Language Patterns; \*Language Role; Language Usage; Language Variation; \*Refugees; \*Student Educational Objectives; Student Subcultures; Success; Youth

ABSTRACT

A study examined the roles of language and school in the lives of a group of five Indochinese friends, aged 10-12, in the same sixth-grade class. Two were born in the United States; three were born in Thai refugee camps. The ways in which the subjects defined themselves in relation to other students, particularly other Asian students, and to each other are noted, and their language patterns both during sixth and seventh grades and in the intervening summer are described, with special attention to rates of copula deletion, use of rap slang/African-American vernacular, and "bad" words. Shifts in both relationships and language patterns during this period, and external influences on them, are also explored. It is concluded that the students' language use helped them define their identities in relation to each other and to certain social groups, and also revealed their understandings of various social categories associated with schooling. Contains 59 references. (MSE)

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### Interactions of Identity:

## Indochinese Refugee Youths, Language Use, and Schooling

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Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association,  
Chicago, March 24-28, 1997

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"My mom left Cambodia because of the Khmer Rouge and thought it'd be safe here. But it's just like war here in Cooltown too. And at least in Cambodia there were only floods and war. Here in California there are earthquakes too."  
 ---Shacka Zulu

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

The influx of immigrants and refugees to the United States in the past two decades represents the largest wave of newcomers that this country has seen since the early 1900s (McDonnell & Hill 1993: ix). These new arrivals, primarily from Latin America and Asia, are the embodiment of a rich diversity of languages and cultures. They are also, however, the living embodiment of historical imbalances in the global distribution of wealth and power, and have long suffered from the resulting violence of poverty and war. Most are poor and have come to this country with little formal education or technical training, and many are strangers to Western culture and modern urban life. Among these new arrivals about one million Indochinese refugees who were forced to flee from the devastation and human suffering in their homelands were eventually settled in the United States. It is now estimated that 1.25 million Vietnamese, Cambodian, Lao, Hmong, and Mien have come to be a part of the American multicultural fabric, with hundreds of thousands of Indochinese students now enrolled in the nation's schools, more than one third in California (Wehrly 1990; Rubin 1981; Walker-Moffat 1995).

The present paper explores the lives of a group of Indochinese refugee youths as they re-establish themselves in their new communities and country, negotiating their identities in the inner city where they now live. Because schooling plays such a vital role in their life chances, I focus on the critical transition that the kids make from elementary school into junior high, discussing some of the major factors that contribute to their success or failure in school and the shaping of who they are and who they hope to become. Special attention is paid to their language use as symbolic markers of their identities in various contexts and over time. I examine, in particular, the relationship between their shifting use of the African American vernacular English (AAVE) feature of copula deletion, rap slang/AAVE talk, and "bad" words, and their stances toward schooling, hip hop culture, gangs, and becoming part of "mainstream" America.

## Identity and Language Use

Before turning to the kids in this study, I would like to discuss the notion of identity and the role of language in defining, maintaining, and representing identities. It is important to note first that social identities do not exist a priori, nor are they deterministically fixed or reducible to simplified categories such as class, race/ethnicity, sex/gender, or age, as much educational research would have us believe. Rather, individuals' identities are the unique combinations of

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to extend my appreciation to the Spencer Foundation for funding this research.

their many senses of self, always relational, with various aspects coming to the fore in any given context, continuously emerging and changing through interactions that people have with the surrounding world everyday, and in particular, in the communities of practice in which they participate (Lave & Wenger 1991; Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 1995). Since communities of practice emerge only over time in relation to other communities of practice, to understand identity it is necessary to look both locally at actual social practices and at the "global" historical processes through which social categories and power relations have been constructed (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 1992).

One of the most important ways in which identities are created and understood is through language use. The language forms that people use do not merely reflect their membership in social groups, but are active in the maintenance of their identities, and reveal their cognitive organization of any given situation (Smith, Giles, & Hewstone 1980: 287; Giles, Coupland, & Coupland 1991: 37; Le Page & Tabouret-Keller 1985: 5; Brown & Levinson 1979; Ochs 1993: 295-96). The social meanings of language variation are, in large part, historically derived, tasting of the many associations that have come to flavor it over time (Bakhtin [1935] 1981: 293). Great bodies of research on bilingual issues, dialects, and language styles have consistently found correlations between language features and various social categories, such as class, sex, race, ethnicity, and age (e.g., Fishman 1968, 1989, 1991; Fase, Jaspaert, & Kroon 1992; Wardhaugh 1987; Gudykunst 1988; Labov 1966, 1972a; Wolfram 1969; Trudgill 1974). As Brown and Levinson (1979) suggest, however, variables are not markers of social groups per se but of relations between groups and differing linguistic systems which can only be understood by looking at how the various linguistic and social parts fit into a structural whole. The link between local style variation and global social variation is seen in accommodation theory which focusses on the ways in which speakers actively shift their speech styles according to their relations with interlocutors who are perceived as members of various social groups (Bell 1984; Giles, Coupland, & Coupland 1991). Ochs (1992: 341-342) also argues for a more functional approach to the study of linguistic forms and social identity. She discusses, for instance, the association between linguistic features and the pragmatic work that they perform (e.g., social acts or the conveyance of stances), which in turn, may be distributed differentially among certain social groups, thus coming to be associated with them. Such an approach moves beyond mere correlations between language variation and social groups and leads to examinations of differential access to various language forms and speech activities, and reveals speakers' understandings of the relation between language variation and social identities. Similarly, Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992, 1995) see the use of differing language styles as indicative of membership in certain communities of practice and not others, and as an important means by which people define themselves in relation to local and global structures of power.

### **Access and Attitude**

The acquisition of ways of speaking and the use of language forms once acquired are linked to structural power relations of access and attitude (Schumann 1978; Rickford 1985). Both play important roles in the present study because the language issues involved come at the conjunction of second language acquisition and dialect acquisition. In regard to their acquisition

of English as a second language, the kids in this study had virtually no access to standard English except through their teachers at school. And the limited access that they did have, though sink-or-swim total immersion English classes, was not effective in enabling them to fully acquire written or spoken standard English. Without standard English, which has historically been the language of power and prestige in the United States, the overall academic achievement of the students and their economic opportunities are certain to be limited. More importantly, because of the shortage of bilingual teachers and aides, which is especially severe for student populations with low representation, the kids had to struggle with subject matter in a language that they could not understand, and consequently, fell behind academically.<sup>2</sup> The kids thus neither fully acquired standard English nor sufficient content at school.

Attitude and access also played major roles in the kids' acquisition of African American vernacular English (AAVE). Although none were involved in social networks with African Americans they were living in a district of the city that was predominantly low-income black. Those who spent more time out on the streets would most likely have had more access to situations in which AAVE was used. A more significant factor, however, was the kids' access to AAVE, rap slang, and "bad" words through rap music and social networks of non-African American kids who identified with hip hop culture and with gangs. Especially over time, the kids not only came to associate AAVE with the oppositional acts and stances which help to define these youth cultures, but to associate the non-use of AAVE, i.e., standard English, with being white, uncool, and "faggot nerdy." (See Labov 1972b, 1982 for similar views toward AAVE among African American youth; Hewitt 1986 for Jamaican creole among white youth in London; Rampton 1995 for Caribbean creole among Anglos and Panjabis in England.)

To better understand the social meanings of AAVE and hip hop culture it is important to know that AAVE was developed by slaves as a "counterlanguage," a hidden voice of protest, in circumstances of great oppression, and has long been used to express solidarity, identity, and opposition to domination (Smitherman 1977; Rickford & Traugott 1985; Morgan 1994; Scott 1990). AAVE is prominent in hip hop culture, whose cornerstones of rap music, graffiti, and breakdancing, emerged in the mid-1970s from the same seeds and the same needs, as a powerful voice for oppressed black urban youth (Rose 1994). Not only in the verbal use of AAVE, rap slang, and "bad" words, but in the fashion style of "baggy-ass" pants and "hoodies" is the challenge of hip hop cultural identity expressed. Reaching far beyond racial and ethnic lines, the oppositional style of hip hop culture has become "the meaning of life for millions of kids and young adults, influencing how they talk, walk and interact, regardless of their race or pedigree" (Nelson 1994: 34).

Rap is centrally concerned with issues of relational identity and location (Rose 1994: 10). The lyrics and style of gangsta rap in particular speak of marginal inner-city black ghetto identity in opposition to more centrally located groups and institutions of oppression, overt and covert, such as the police and schools. Gangsta rap, "a form of verbal combat" (Fernando 1994), speaks

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<sup>2</sup> The National Education Association provides a figure of 175,000 more bilingual teachers needed nationwide than are presently available (GAO 1994; CCSSO February 1990). The California Department of Education estimates that California alone has a shortage of 22,000 bilingual teachers (GAO 1994).

of confrontational rage (Gladney 1995), and is "engaged in symbolic and ideological warfare with institutions and groups that symbolically, ideologically, and materially oppress African Americans" (Rose 1994: 101). It is also predominantly a male domain (Fernando 1994: 271; Salem 1993) which valorizes machismo (Toop 1984: 93) and advocates the oppression of women within a culture that is already oppressed in so many other ways. Thus, prototypical gangsta rap identity expresses, in a violent macho style, angry opposition to systems of oppression which have precluded access to legitimate means of material gain and the attainment of social status and respect in mainstream institutions.

### The Kids in Context

The kids in this study formed a group of friends from the same neighborhood and sixth-grade classroom, ranging in age from 10 to 12 at the start of their year in sixth grade.

<u>NAMES<sup>3</sup></u>	<u>SEX</u>	<u>SELF-DEFINED ETHNICITY/RACE</u>	<u>AGE</u>
Ken	M	Cambodian/Asian, born in Thai refugee camp	12
Shacka Zulu	M	Cambodian/Asian, born in Thai refugee camp	10
North America	M	Asian/[Thai-Cambodian], born in Thai refugee camp	11
Huy	M	Asian/[Vietnamese], born in the U.S.	10
Blinker	M	Mien/Asian, Lao, born in the U.S.	11

Except for Huy, whose mother was able to escape from Vietnam while in her teens, the families of the kids came to the U.S. after 1982 in the third wave of Indochinese refugees, who suffered through atrocities and hunger for a longer period of time, and were generally much less equipped in material, cultural, and symbolic capital, e.g., education, material resources, job skills, and degree of westernization than refugees who came in the first and second waves after the fall of Saigon in 1975. A notable exception was Ken's family whose father had attended college and had been a teacher in Cambodia. They arrived in the U.S. in 1987 in what is sometimes referred

<sup>3</sup> These names are pseudonyms chosen by the kids. All other names in this paper are also fictitious.

to as the fourth wave of refugees (Walker-Moffat 1995: 32), comprised of political diehards in relatively privileged positions, who left their countries only when they had no other choice.

The kids are now living in a large, low-income inner-city setting in California in an area of the city that is primarily African American (60%) and Latino (27%), with 9% Asian, and 4% Other. The immediate neighborhood of the kids, however, which is also the neighborhood of their elementary school, has a larger Asian population, which can be seen in the ethnic breakdown of the school: Asian (60%), Hispanic (21%), Black (18%), and Other (1%). To provide a better picture of these kids and their neighborhood, 90% of the 1000 students at their school were eligible for free/reduced price breakfasts and lunches, and 66% were categorized as "limited English proficient."

### Sixth Grade

Throughout their year in sixth grade, three of the boys, Ken, Shacka Zulu, and North America, formed a social group, having been friends and classmates since the second grade. Huy joined them from time to time and became a regular member of their group during the spring of that year, crossing over from the periphery of a group of Chinese and Chinese Vietnamese boys in their class who were known as the "smart" kids. These "smart" boys, as well as "smart" girls, served as important reference groups which the kids in this study used to define themselves as "not smart," and their communities of practice differed. While the kids in this study got S's and N's on their report cards, for instance, the "smart" kids got E's. The "smart" kids were also known to have higher standardized test scores, were chosen to participate in various school programs such as GATE (for "gifted" and "talented" students), student council, and various academic competitions, and they weren't categorized as "limited English proficient" as were the kids in this study. While the "smart" boys played close to the school buildings in the same area as the girls and younger students, the kids in this study played on the basketball courts or in the outer fields. The kids in this study also noted that the teacher differed in his disciplinary treatment of them and the "smart" kids. And as the year progressed they complained that the teacher "rapped" too much, putting them to sleep, while the "smart" kids thought that the teacher's lectures were informative and interesting.

The kids in this study also defined themselves in relation to each other. Ken was the clear leader of the group. He was older, bigger, stronger, and more daring than the others, and was nearly always the most vocal of the three. His relative dominance over the others is exemplified in exchange (1) when he tells Shacka Zulu to shut up (line 4), and corrects North America, jokingly reprimanding him as if he were an adult speaking to a child (line 19). Ken's copula deletion rate was consistently lower than Shacka Zulu's and North America's, and stayed low, between 5% and 10%, throughout sixth grade (Fig. 1). Ken also had little use of rap slang/AAVE talk (Fig. 2) and "bad" words (Fig. 3). As the most dominant member of the group with real status he did not have to use symbolic means to express any of the social meanings associated with AAVE, as Eckert (1987), in her study of high school students, also found with more central members of her "jock" and "burnout" groups.

- (1) 5.23/94
- 1 SZ: Ooh, he steal a penny.  
 2 K: Watch. For good luck.  
 3 SZ: That's bad luck, ain't it?  
 4 → K: Shut up.  
 5 SZ: What.  
 6 Y: So you're causing wars.  
 7 NA: Yup.  
 8 SZ: You made war.  
 9 NA: [?] somebody get hit by a car over here? 'Member? 'Member? In Ms. Pearl class?  
 10 K: Not here.  
 11 NA: Here.  
 12 K: No. No, it ain't. It's what, at school.  
 13 NA: Not at school, see, here.  
 14 K: At school.  
 15 NA: I don't know where.  
 16 Y: A student?  
 17 K: Yup.  
 18 NA: Yeah, a student.  
 19 → K: 'Cause he wasn't listening to his teacher. And that was North America.  
 20 NA: I know. Me. I wonder why it's always me.

In contrast, Shacka Zulu was the smallest and youngest of the three, and his relatively subordinate position became increasingly more pronounced as the kids got older. As can be seen in Fig. 1, his copula deletion rate was relatively high, shifting slightly upward over time, from 22.62% to 29.03%. This high level can partly be explained in terms of native language transfer since the copula is not used with predicate adjectives in Cambodian. However, since Shacka Zulu was deleting with equal frequency for nominals, at least part of his use can probably be attributed to his low status in the group. He also had substantially higher counts of rap slang/AAVE talk than the other two boys (Fig. 2). As the most subordinate member, reluctant to overtly challenge his friends either physically or verbally, he used instead covert linguistic means to assert himself symbolically.

North America was almost as large and strong as Ken, but he was much more reserved in general, especially at first with me. He begins with a relatively low level of copula deletion, 9.52%, which shifts to a significantly higher level over time, 16.67%. His speech was also free of "bad" words (Fig. 3), and only later in the year was it sprinkled with a bit of rap slang/AAVE talk (Fig. 2). Part of the explanation for the shift in his language usage could be that as the year progressed North America was spending more and more time on the streets and thus gained greater access to AAVE. But because all instances of deletion were directed in speech to me, at least part of his shift was probably related to the relative distance between the two of us, which operated on both horizontal and vertical dimensions (Brown & Gilman 1960). He saw me at first not only as a relative "stranger," but also as an adult and a representative of institutions of authority--schools. His language use thus provides an indication of the salience in his eyes of my identification with schools, as well as his stance toward these institutions (Goffman 1963: 246). His later shift to a higher level of deletion can be seen as a decrease in horizontal social distance through growing familiarity with me (Baugh 1983), a decreased association of me with schooling, and/or the beginning of a shift in his stance toward the institution of education in

**Fig. 1 Copula Deletion**

	11/18/93	2/20/93	5/23/94	8/5/94	9/18/94	3/11/94	5/28/95	6/14/95
KEN	5.36% (3/69)	8.54% (7/82)	8% (4/50)	21.69% (18/83)	17.5% (7/40)	--	24.49% (12/49)	--
SHACKA ZULU	--	22.62% (19/84)	29.03% (9/31)	[46.15%] [6/13]	[90%] [9/10]	36.76% (25/68)	[40%] [2/5]	60% (57/95)
NORTH AMERICA	9.52% (2/21)	--	16.67% (3/18)	56.82% (25/44)	58.62% (17/29)	--	--	--
HUY	--	--	--	25.64% (10/39)	[33.33%] [1/3]	--	52.17% (12/23)	--
BLINKER	--	--	--	--	43.75% (14/32)	--	--	--

**Fig. 2 Rap Slang/AAVE Talk**

	11/18/93	2/20/93	5/23/94	8/5/94	9/18/94	3/11/95	5/28/95	6/14/95
KEN	3	1	5	11	6	--	14	--
SHACKA ZULU	--	11	8	5	6	25	2	56
NORTH AMERICA	0	--	3	23	4	--	--	--
HUY	--	--	--	6	6	--	4	--
BLINKER	--	--	--	--	3	--	--	--

**Fig. 3 "Bad" Words**

	11/18/93	2/20/93	5/23/94	8/5/94	9/18/94	3/11/95	5/28/95	6/14/95
KEN	0	0	3	2	4	--	7	--
SHACKA ZULU	--	0	0	9	1	6	4	22
NORTH AMERICA	0	--	0	5	3	--	--	--
HUY	--	--	--	1	2	--	3	--
BLINKER	--	--	--	--	0	--	--	--

general.

### Summer

In late July as the school year came to a close and the summer began, the kids had junior high school on their minds. By the date of the next set of data, 8/5/94, the dissolution of their childhood peer group had begun, for they knew that they would be splitting up into separate schools the following year. For all of the kids and their parents the choice of which school to attend was dictated not by the academic merits of the schools but by concerns for physical safety. Both Shacka Zulu's and Huy's mothers transferred their sons to a school outside of the neighborhood to try to protect them from the ethnic/racial gangs that were common at the local junior high. Ken's father, on the other hand, decided that his son would go to the local school where Ken's older brother and his brother's "gangsta" friends would ensure that he had protection. North America had not yet decided which school to attend, so much of the kids' talk on this day focused on the pros and cons of the two junior highs in relation to their identities, and their identifications with each other and with various other social groups.

North America was leaning strongly toward the school that Shacka Zulu and Huy would be attending, mostly for reasons of personal safety, but he didn't want to be there with such "weak" friends. And although he closely identified with Ken, he didn't want to go to his school. North America thus attempted to persuade Ken to change his mind by invoking an Asian identification with him, maximizing the stereotypically violent aspects of "Mexican" gangs of Bloods, and African American drive-by shooters at Ken's junior high, while minimizing the confrontational aspects of the same ethnic/racial groups at Shacka Zulu and Huy's school. He explained that the tagging on the walls at their school was done by "only a few blacks," and calling forth gender stereotypes, argued that the school had only a small number of "sissy Latinos."

Linguistically throughout the day, both Ken and North America expressed their "macho" identities by verbally attacking Shacka Zulu, making him the object of their ridicule. They addressed him as "punk," "nigga," "fool," and "stupid," made fun of his haircut and small size, jeered at him for nearly drowning, and infantilized him saying that when he was about to drown he was probably thinking, "Oh mama, mama, help me" (2a, line 4). Ken's and especially North America's copula deletion rates rose dramatically---Ken's, from 8% to 21.69%, and North America's, from 16.67% to 56.82% (e.g., 2b, lines 1 & 5). This rise corresponds not only with an identification with each other and with identities of "toughness" and "opposition" to other ethnic/racial groups but also with a disidentification with Shacka Zulu and the "weak" identity that he represented. In addition to their high copula rates North America and Ken also had significantly larger numbers of rap slang/AAVE talk (Fig. 2; e.g., 2a, line 8) than the other kids, which they also used to mark a tough, oppositional identity and their dominance in the group.

(2a) 8/5/94<sup>4</sup>

- 1 → K: [laughing] He's struggling for his life.  
 2 H: I'll teach you how to swim. Throw Shacka Zulu into the water and say, "Swim or die."  
 3 NA: /I bet you/ I bet you the first thing was in Shacka Zulu mind when he was about to drown  
 4 → was, "Oh mama, mama, help me." Huh.  
 5 SZ: No.  
 6 NA: Yeah, right. Then what is.  
 7 SZ: Sexy, sexy.  
 8 → K: Say that to yo' mama she slap you upside yo' head.

(2b)

- 1 → NA: Yup. I know that place. And AND Central City. (.) See look it. The city vandalize.  
 2 K: Vandalize.  
 3 NA: Black people live here.  
 4 SZ: How do you know. You got jumped?  
 5 → NA: Damn! Why you so dumb! You don't see no Asian fuckin' right here.

During the day Ken and North America repeatedly told Shacka Zulu to "shut up," and that is exactly what Shacka Zulu did. Although the number of his copulas, 13, is too small to validly analyze, his deletion rate for these tokens was 46.15%, which perhaps represents an attempt on his part to assert himself during the brief moments that he was allowed to talk. He also had the highest count of "bad" words, 9, despite the small amount of talking that he was able to do.

Ken and North America also made Huy the butt of several jokes, revealing their genderization of schooling and views of parental control. When North America learned that Huy had not thrown away his schoolwork from sixth grade, for instance, he sissified and infantilized him (2c, lines 4 & 6; note the copula deletions), with Ken joining in (2c, line 7). Generally, however, Huy was left in peace, partly because Ken and North America knew that he was physically very fit and did not back down from fights with kids who were known for their toughness. He also showed street smarts, pointing out areas where drive-by shootings had taken place and talking about the gunfire outside of his apartment every night. Huy's copula deletion rate and counts for rap slang/AAVE talk and "bad" words were at about the same levels as "macho" Ken's (Figs. 2 and 3). But in keeping with his relatively lower status, the amount of talking that he did was quite a bit less (Fig. 1).

(2c)

- 1 Y: You guys really threw all of your stuff away?  
 2 NA: Yup.  
 3 H: Not me.  
 4 → NA: Huy a sissy boy.  
 5 Y: Huy, you didn't?  
 6 → NA: He's scared his mama gonna whup him.

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<sup>4</sup> Notes on transcription: // indicates overlapping speech. Capital letters indicate a loud tone of voice. - indicates interruption. (.) indicates length of pause. : indicates lengthening of vowel.

7 K: [In high voice] "Mommy, whup me."

During the summer the split between the two pairs of boys, Ken and North America on the one hand, and Shacka Zula and Huy on the other, became even wider, and North America decided to attend Ken's jr. high. As the summer progressed, however, North America began to distance himself from Ken as well, spending time instead with Ken's older brother and his brother's "gangsta" friends, becoming, according to Huy, a "wannabe." By the beginning of the school year he was dressing in baggy pants, had dyed his hair brown, and had begun smoking cigarettes and weed. And although Ken also now sometimes dressed like a "wannabe," according to Shacka Zulu and Huy, he was "not like that inside."

### 7th Grade

From the start of junior high school the kids entered a world much larger than the world that they had previously known. Not only did their peers at school come in a much greater variety of shapes, colors, sizes, and socioeconomic backgrounds, but also with a much greater range of attitudes toward school and life in general. Since their childhood peer group had dissolved, right from the start they were faced with the daunting task of figuring out where they were and where they wanted to be in the new scheme of things.

Ken chose to identify with the kids who stayed in the cafeteria during lunch. According to Ken, he was with the kids "who don't want to mess with anyone," but according to North America, he was with the "faggot nerds." North America, in contrast, stayed outside in the yard with the "gangstas" and other tough guys who "tackle on the cement." Academically, both Ken and North America were placed in lower track classes and both had ESL, which Ken was very embarrassed about. Ken noted that especially the male teachers were not as nice as those he'd had in elementary school, and that two weeks into the school year only one teacher could remember his name.

Shacka Zulu and Huy kept to themselves at the start of the school year for they greatly feared for their safety and often spoke about "wars" between various ethnic/racial groups. Academically both of them hated their classes. Huy was initially placed in three ESL classes and a low-level math class. And Shacka Zulu soon stopped doing his homework because the teachers never collected it anyway. He was also beginning to get in trouble for being disruptive in class.

A couple of weeks after the start of school the old peer group, at North America's bidding, was joined on an outing by Blinker, a Mien Lao boy from their sixth grade class who was known for his baggy pants and ability to fight. The day was a day of clashing identities and attitudes, expressed both verbally and physically in their interactions with each other. Throughout the day Huy and Shacka Zulu aligned themselves together, and North America and Blinker were "partners," with Ken distancing himself from all of them.

They spoke at length about drugs on this day, and through their talk, negotiated many aspects of themselves and their relations with each other. Ken repeatedly referred to himself as a "good boy," as exemplified in (3a) line 9. Joined by the others, he launched many verbal attacks (3a, lines 2 & 12; 3c) and threatened a physical attack (3b, line 3) on North America and

Blinker for their growing involvement in drugs. Although North America vehemently denied using drugs his real attitude toward them was revealed when he labeled a friend "sissy" for not smoking weed (3c, line 19). His generous use of copula deletions (3c, lines 6, 12, 14, 19), as well as other features of AAVE, such as multiple negatives (3c, line 6), 3rd person singular "S" deletion (3c, line 23), and plural "S" deletion (3c, line 19) perhaps provide a better indication of his view toward drugs than are his repeated denials in this exchange.

(3a) 9/18/94

- 1 B: I know where you could get a ounce. No, a ounce is more /than that./  
 2 → K: /FOOL!/ YOU KNOW WHERE TO GET DRUG?  
 3 B: You could get it at um forty-sev- forty-first. And seventy-first. But seventy-first only sell it by the  
 4 tens.  
 5 NA: /Why they sell it that way?/  
 6 B: /At forty-one/ they only sell it by the ounce. A ounce, they sell it for forty. But /Chath sell it for a  
 7 hundred./  
 8 Y: /Forty an ounce?/  
 9 → K: /Yeah I, not like me./ They shoulda been like me. I been a good boy. [Softly] I never used before.  
 10 /NORTH AMERICA USE IT./  
 11 B: /I never use it too./  
 12 → K: [To North America] Well WHY YOU GOTTA DO THAT, HUH?

(3b)

- 1 K: You're nasty, man. I bet North America been doin' that too.  
 2 H: I know. I bet.  
 3 → K: I'll fight North America.  
 4 → H: He gonna beat North America up. Bun let him sniff one. /Bun let him sniff one./  
 5 → SZ: [To me] /Yep. On telephone. Yep. On telephone./ Yep, yep. On telephone.

(3c)

- 1 SZ: [To North America] Don't sniff no weed.  
 2 B: Man, you're not supposed to sniff no weed. Just smoke it. [Ken and North America talk in  
 3 background.]  
 4 NA: [laughing] No.  
 5 K: See him?  
 6 → NA: He lyin'. I ain't doin' nuttin' like that.  
 7 K: /I saw you./  
 8 B: /I never did anything/ like that.  
 9 → SZ: Yep. Remember on the telephone? Yep, yep.  
 10 K: And you seen his head, you go, and then he shaved it.  
 11 B: North America and Look too.  
 12 → NA: Why you lyin'.  
 13 K: That boy don't do that.  
 14 → NA: He lyin'. He lyin'. He lyin'.  
 15 B: Don't do it.  
 16 K: It's only Bun, Bounmy, and ? [who do] weed ?.  
 17 NA: He DO it.  
 18 K: Cigarette.  
 19 → NA: Cigarette. Yeah. He sissy.  
 20 → SZ: See? See? Yup, yup.

- 21 B: See, North America.  
 22 Y: [All laugh.] Come on, North America.  
 23 → NA: He lie. For real.  
 24 SZ: /He do what, he gonna get-/  
 25 → K: /WHY YOU DO IT, MAN./

Ken's and North America's copula deletion rates diverged slightly, in keeping with their shifting identities, with Ken becoming a bit more standard, moving from 21.69% to 17.5%, and North America's high frequency becoming slightly higher, rising from 56.82% to 58.62%, higher even than Blinker's rate of 43.75%. On this day North America predicted that in ten years' time he would be homeless. And a couple of weeks later he was jumped into an Asian Crip gang.

Shacka Zulu and Huy participated only marginally in interactions with the others. Not only did they physically separate themselves, wandering off while the other boys and I stayed together, but they also played minimal roles in the few interactions in which they did participate. In (3b), lines 2 & 4, for instance, Huy's contributions are merely supportive of those made by Ken, though he inserts an assertive copula deletion in line 4. In addition, there is no uptake on his two attempts to add information in (3b), line 4. Many of Shacka Zulu's contributions did not add to the ongoing interactions of the other kids but were instead asides to me, referring to a telephone conversation that he and I had had the previous night in which he mentioned North America's involvement with drugs (3b, line 5; 3c, lines 9 & 20). And in (3c), line 24, his attempt to speak is cut short, copula deletion and all, by the louder, more dominant Ken. While everyone tried to some extent to be "cool," displaying valuable street knowledge about drugs and drug busts, all were successful except Shacka Zulu (3c, line 1) and Huy (3b, line 4), who instead displayed their ignorance. Although both had too few copulas to validly count, 10 and 3, respectively, of their small numbers Shacka Zulu's frequency was a high 90%, and Huy's, 33.33%, as they symbolically tried to assert themselves and the "coolness" that they didn't have.

Throughout the year in seventh grade Ken maintained a B grade point average and was chosen to be a student government representative. He continued to protect himself by staying in the cafeteria during lunch at school and by never leaving his house once he got home. Since Ken never went out anymore Shacka Zulu no longer wanted to spend time with him. And Ken wanted nothing to do with Shacka Zulu because he was always "stealing, lying, and pretending he's rich," while making fun of Ken for being so poor.

Shacka Zulu and Huy, on the other hand, began to participate in a new community of practice. They made friends with "rich" new Asians (Cambodian, Korean, Chinese, Vietnamese, and Filipino), and formed a tagging crew led by Shacka Zulu which was later to evolve into a gang, both for protection and for money. Academically both Shacka Zulu and Huy continued to hate their classes and Shacka Zulu was beginning to cut school with growing regularity. Their choice in music now was decidedly gangsta rap, and their clothing style had shifted to "baggy-ass" pants. A few days before the date of the next data analyzed, 3/11/94, Shacka Zulu was arrested for shoplifting. His copula deletion rate was relatively high, 36.76%, and his use of rap slang/AAVE talk jumped from 6 to 25.

Shortly before the date of the next data analyzed here, in May, Shacka Zulu was kicked out of school for possession of a weapon, and he was failing or receiving no credit in all of his classes at school. Looking at the kids' language use on 5/28/95, it can be seen that Ken is still

dominant over the others in regard to the amount of talking he does (49 copulas), and that Shacka Zulu is again nearly silent in his presence with only 5 copulas, though with a high 40% deleted. Ken's copula deletion (24.49%), rap slang/AAVE talk (14), and "bad" word (7) counts are higher than they had previously been for two overlapping reasons. Because Ken has chosen to identify with schooling and to reject the macho path of gang membership for protection (4, line 1), he is now asserting himself and his masculinity symbolically through his language use. He is also largely confrontational with Shacka Zulu and Huy, threatening to beat them up, calling them stupid for having to go to summer school, and belittling them indirectly by criticizing the short statures of members of a gang, CBK (Cooltown Bad Kids), which was soliciting the two at the time (4, line 6). Ken's opposition to gangs is also seen in his appreciation of rap music which "is tryin' to get people out of gang by singin' about the GHETTO thing." Huy, on the other hand, was now referring to himself as a "wannabe" (4, line 8), which was a great shift away from the "smart" kid that he had been in sixth grade. His copula deletion rate was also now more than double what it had been the previous summer, jumping from 25.64% to 52.17%.

(4) 5/28/95

- 1 → K: Dumb, dumb SSC try to get me in. I said nope. I just yell out, "HE::LL no."
- 2 Y: Who's SSC.
- 3 H: /South Side Crip./
- 4 K: /Those South Side Crip./ /Nuttin' but midget./
- 5 H: /You, they get-/
- 6 → K: So what, dude. At least they taller than CBK. Nuttin' but short people there, man. Hella crazy. They
- 7 should get at least three or four tall people.
- 8 → H: I'm a wannabe.

The last data that I look at here is from June 1995 after Shacka Zulu had spent about a month in an alternative school participating in yet a new community of practice comprised of kids who had also been expelled from their schools.

(5) 6/13/95

- 1 → SZ: I thought I thought Laredo was like a normal school. That's what I thought. Until I went there.
- 2 Y: Huh?
- 3 SZ: Until I went there. Ah, that's a poor-ass school.
- 4 Y: Yeah, I didn't even find it, you know in that little book I've got of the different schools in Cooltown,
- 5 it's not in there. So I don't know where-
- 6 SZ: They put M.A.K. MAK Center.
- 7 Y: Yeah, I don't know what that is.
- 8 → SZ: Mixed-up Asian Kids.

As can be seen in exchange (5), lines 1 & 9, he has come to view himself as "abnormal" and "mixed-up." And his variable counts (Figs. 1-3) rise dramatically in keeping with the great shift in his identity.

## Conclusion

The kids in this study are among the newest arrivals to the United States, numbering among the so-called 1.5<sup>5</sup> and second generations of Indochinese refugees. In educational research, kids such as these are usually categorized in the "Asian model minority" stereotype which presumes that Asian students are faring exceptionally well in school. Recent studies, however, have begun to break down this stereotype and to make further distinctions both between and within the various ethnic groups that comprise "Indochinese refugees." Those who came to the U.S. in the third wave of refugees, for instance, have been found to have correspondingly higher rates of school failure and poverty than earlier groups of Indochinese refugees (Strand & Jones 1985). Other studies have found that Cambodians have the highest high school dropout rates, standardized test scores far below the national norm, especially in verbal skills, and lower grade point averages than other refugee groups (Rumbaut & Ima 1987; Rumbaut 1994: 767; Wehrly 1990; Yee, et al.). In addition, although many refugees are achieving relatively high GPAs, they are commonly enrolled in lower track courses rather than those necessary for college admission (Walker-Moffat 1995: 141-43). And gang activity among Vietnamese youth has also been noted (Rumbaut & Ima 1987). The present study adds to this growing body of research.

Although all of the factors involved in the identity formation of the kids and the reasons behind their orientation toward schooling cannot be considered here, a few factors which are salient not only for these particular kids but for many other Indochinese youth will be very briefly reviewed below. First are the historical circumstances which brought these kids and their families to the U.S. in the first place. As victims in the deadly game of global politics in which the U.S. played a major role, these refugee families were uprooted from their homelands through no choice of their own. In the process of adjusting to life in this country and struggling to survive economically, many of their cultural norms have been weakened (Tollefson 1989: 34-37). Traditional patriarchal family structures, for example, have been influenced by American norms and the need for women to work to make ends meet. In addition, because children have tended to learn English faster than their parents, parent-child roles are often reversed, with children mediating between their parents and institutions such as hospitals, housing offices, and schools (Trueba, Cheng, & Ima 1993). So cultural and generational upheavals have been closely intertwined. In addition, the residual effects of the horrors of war, not to mention great anxiety about violence in the inner city, still reverberate throughout the families of the kids and among Cambodians in general, who have higher rates of depressive and stress-related symptoms than any other Indochinese refugee group (Rumbaut 1989: 155). Under such tremendous economic, cultural, and psychological stress, many families have fallen apart. Shacka Zulu's and Huy's mothers, for instance, were single heads of households. And North America's parents had so many kids that they couldn't keep track of them. Ken's family, however, remained intact, with most Cambodian cultural norms preserved.

Poverty, race, gender, violence, and the oppositional youth cultures of hip hop and gangs exerted powerful influences on the kids' lives. Poverty was racialized for these youths for they

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<sup>5</sup> Foreign-born persons who came to the U.S. at a young age.

were the "new kids on the block" in neighborhoods of severely limited economic resources, and they were often the target of attacks by African Americans and Latinos. Some youths, such as Ken, dealt with violence and the fear of violence by imprisoning themselves at home and school while trying to live down the label of "faggot nerd." Others joined gangs which gave them not only protection and the material goods that they desired, but respect from peers, which is especially important as kids move from parent-oriented childhoods to peer-oriented adolescent life (Erikson 1950, 1968). The kids' views of gangs were also racialized, and linked to their ethnic histories, with Asians nearly always being Crips, whose color is blue, in opposition to "Mexican" and African American Bloods, whose color, red, was associated with the Khmer Rouge. The distance between the kids and white America was even greater, defined in terms of race, economics, and gender. Shacka Zulu commented, for example, that his was a "trashy, dirty, poor neighborhood," and added, "The other side is white. All these white people walking with dogs. I feel like I'm in another world." In the eyes of these kids, to be American meant to be white. And white America was not necessarily a world that they wanted to enter, for it was for some, a world of "faggot nerds" and kids who didn't know how to fight.

The kids' language use not only helped them define their identities in relation to each other and to certain social groups, but it also revealed their understandings of various social categories associated with schooling. Those with greater AAVE usage saw kids who identified with schooling in a category blur of faggots, nerds, and rich whites, while they saw themselves as masculine, "tough," and poor Asian. They also associated standard English and the non-use of "bad" words with "acting white." (See Labov 1972b for similar findings among inner-city African American youths.) In contrast, Ken, who had the least AAVE usage and who was doing relatively well in school, saw those who became involved in gangs and drugs and who took an oppositional view toward schooling as "stupid" and "bad."

Kids' attitudes toward schooling are related to their physical and emotional well-being. Some are able to find respect and safety in the adult-, "mainstream" American-oriented world of academics and in their homes, while others find that their sense of well-being is threatened in those communities of practice, and turn instead to oppositional cultures such as hip hop and gangs to find the respect and protection that they need. The choices that kids make in either direction are quite rational on a certain level. They are grounded not only in kids' personal histories but in the socioeconomic and political contexts of the cultures and communities in which the kids and their school systems exist. The many ideological factors--personal and structural, local and global-- that influence the shaping of kids' identities and their stances toward schooling and becoming part of "mainstream" America are also determining the life trajectories of future generations of Indochinese refugees in the United States, and contributing to the role of formal education as the primary means by which the stratified social order of this nation is created and reproduced.

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