It has been observed that an alveolar click (commonly rendered as tsk) is a fairly frequent feature of Chicano English (CE) (Fought 2003), but it has gone relatively unstudied. This paper discusses a study of 12 Chicano/a university students’ metalinguistic commentary on how they use clicks and a separate analysis of over 300 clicks from naturally-occurring conversations with 14 female fifth graders. It shows that clicks are used often, serving key functions expressing social meaning and in regulating discourse, with systematic differences existing between these two functions. Additionally, it shows the distribution/function of CE clicks differs from other varieties.

The metalinguistic commentary data suggest that not only are CE speakers familiar with clicks and report using them often, but they have fairly clear ideas of how they are used by others. Most of the responses I collected were related to negative affect (e.g. negative attitude, discontent, annoyance, disapproval) and a smaller portion were associated with the discourse-regulating category of planning speech (e.g. filler words, thinking, like um). They also mentioned clicks are representative of their identity. That is, clicks also index some sort of in-group identity status and therefore function as a linguistic feature used in the construction of social meaning.

For the analysis of the clicks used in the conversations, each click was coded for manner of realization, distribution in the utterance, and meaning/function. On average, 12 clicks occurred every five minutes. A close examination of the phonetic realization of clicks reveals two types: a longer ‘affricate-like’ click and a shorter ‘stop-like’ click. Clicks mainly occur sentence-initially, but also appear sentence-internally, sentence-finally, and as turns in their own right (e.g. a click of defiance). Clicks are primarily used to express some ‘emotion,’ but also have a discourse-regulating function. They express negative affect (e.g. talking about a problem, expressing disapproval) more often than positive or neutral affect (e.g. talking about favorite classes, expressing excitement).

“Negative” clicks are mostly used to express disapproval, but are also used to express emotions such as frustration, defiance, impatience, disappointment, embarrassment and disbelief. “Non-negative clicks” are mostly used for discourse regulating functions, such as “thinking” (e.g. word searching) and “turn-taking” (e.g. interrupting).

Clicks that express social meaning, usually negative affect, differ in distribution and manner from clicks serving a discourse function. Negative clicks are more likely to occur sentence-finally and as turns (p=0.008) than non-negative clicks, which often occur turn and sentence-initially. In addition, negative clicks are more likely to be affricate-like clicks (p=0.0239) than non-negative clicks, which means they are typically longer in duration.

This data suggest that CE clicks encompass the functions of clicks in Black English and creoles (called suck-teeth), which primarily express negative emotions (e.g. disgust, defiance, disapproval, frustration, impatience, disappointment; cf. Rickford & Rickford 1976) and clicks in other English varieties, which are used more for regulating discourse than for displaying affect, the affect conveyed is milder than that in Black or Chicano English, and clicks occur less frequently (e.g. Benor 2004, Ogden 2010, Stuart-Smith 2009).