

Teaching unit 17: Being Asian in London – Ethnicity, gender and social networks

Background

Asians are the largest ethnic minority group in the UK, just under 5% of the population, and 35% of the community lives in London. Asians have been present in the UK for centuries but their presence grew after the Second World War, when migration from Commonwealth countries was encouraged due to labour shortages in Britain. This increase in numbers initially led to race rioting and violence driven by British nationalist groups, but over the decades British Asian contributions to food, literature, music, and politics have become an established part of British culture.

This teaching unit focuses on a Punjabi neighbourhood in West London. A set of audio clips is used to illustrate many distinct ways of sounding British Asian in London. Discussion points explore the influence of social factors on speech and identity, including age and childhood experiences, ethnic politics, generational change, gender, and social networks. Students are encouraged to discuss the role of these factors in their own experience of different styles of speaking.

Audio clips and links to relevant Linguistics Research Digest articles are available at:
<http://www.englishlanguageresources.org/teaching-units/17-being-asian-in-london/>

Audio clips

As part of a wider project, conversational interviews were gathered from 75 residents in West London (Sharma 2011). The four extracts below, with pseudonyms, are representative of some of the speaking styles that have developed around distinct identities.

Anwar (middle-aged man, age 41)

"But then one time my father y'know God rest his soul, he had a philosophy, he goes to me 'yaar one of these days, this food is going to become the UK national dish' and look what happened!"

Simran (middle-aged woman, age 49)

"And she had a Indian radio station on. And managers didn't mind, and I think one or two girls were complaining. But she was listening more like at home now. I said you might as well get your samosas and your rotis in!"

Anand (young man, age 20)

"They're very um tight knit communities. And they're, you know, they're quite militant perhaps."

Namrita (young woman, age 28)

"I wanted to go into media. I wanted to go into acting."

Discussion points

Observable language features

Accent

In these recordings you can hear a number of speech features that originally come from South Asian languages but that have become common in British Asian English. A few examples include:

- A monophthong (single vowel) “o” rather than “ow” in words like “rotis” and “soul”
- A monophthong (single vowel) “e” rather than “ey” in words like “days”
- A retroflex “t” pronunciation, produced with the tongue tip curled back, in words such as “time”, “tight”, and “militant”
- Pronunciation of “th” with the tongue tip behind rather than between the teeth in words such as “these” and “then”

(Discussion point: Can you hear other differences from Standard British English?)

But note that some of these people sound very British too. Simran uses traditional British (not Asian) and slightly Cockney-style vowels in the words “mind”, “complaining”, and “home”. She also uses a glottal stop at the end of several words ending in “t”, also a very British way to speak. And Namrita sounds entirely standard British with no trace of Asian pronunciation. You can hear this in how she pronounces “t”, “o”, and “-ing”. This does not mean that she has rejected her Asian roots: She is deeply involved in her community and speaks fluent Punjabi.

Grammar and vocabulary

The two younger speakers use grammar and vocabulary that does not differ noticeably from their non-Asian British peers, though in other parts of their recordings they do use occasional Punjabi words. Anwar also uses grammar that is fairly standard and similar to non-Asians in London, but he does use some discourse markers linked to Asian culture, e.g. “yaar”, which means “friend” in Punjabi and Hindi, and a traditional marker of respect when mentioning his father.

Simran uses a few non-standard grammatical features that are common in Indian English. It is relatively rare to see features of non-native grammar maintained in this way after the first generation. Simran uses “a” rather than “an” before “radio station”. She also has ellipsis of the article “the” before “managers”, though this could be said to be a feature of informal British English as well, at the start of a sentence. She also uses very Asian pronunciation when she says the Punjabi word “rotis”, showing a link between pronunciation and vocabulary.

Age and gender

The older man and older woman both grew up in the first group of local-born British Asians in West London. Their speech is different in some ways from the speech of the younger man and woman. You should be able to hear that both of them have more Asian accent features in their speech than the younger speakers. As noted, Namrita sounds much more standard or posh than the older woman, and that she sounds more standard than the men. These age and gender differences are explained in more detail below.

Social worlds and speaking styles

The recordings above only give us a tiny snapshot of each individual’s speech: just one clip of each person speaking. In fact, when these people were recorded in different situations, it emerged that some of them had much wider ranges of styles than others. For example, in the clip below Anwar is speaking to a British company representative, as opposed to an Indian interviewer in the previous clip. He sounds very different!

Anwar (middle-aged man, age 41)

"The difficult two pieces we've bought them already we've got them. But the main screen is something that is not just off the shelf. It has to be made."

In contrast to the previous clip, Anwar uses typical British, rather than Indian, pronunciations in almost all of his vowels and consonants in this second clip. For example:

- compare the "ey" vowel in "UK" in clip 1 to "made" in clip 2
- compare the "th" in "these" in clip 1 to "them" in clip 2
- compare the "t" at the end of "what" in clip 1 to "bought" and "got" in clip 2

Intriguingly, it was the older men and the younger women who had these wide repertoires of speaking styles. Older women and younger men had much less range. They did not change how they spoke across situations very much and sounded very similar across different situations.

Why would such a curious pattern emerge, where a gender pattern in the older group gets *reversed* in the younger one? It turned out that, even though all participants grew up in West London, the older generation still had more traditional Punjabi social roles, with women's social worlds being more limited to the community. They married relatively young and tended to have family-focused lives. This meant that they tended to interact with a smaller range of types of people and so didn't develop many different styles of speaking. The men in that generation went into their father's businesses so they tended to interact both with the wider British community and South Asians back home, needing to adapt their speech accordingly. They also were more visibly active politically, to combat racist opposition to their new communities, and in this capacity tended to develop speech styles suited to a wider audience. They also tended to experience more physical violence than girls in school (numbers of Asian students were still low and children were often sent by bus to schools far away from home to keep the number of Asians in a school low) and so developed an ability to sound very local and British to survive those threats in their schools and neighbourhoods.

The younger generation had a completely different experience. By the time they grew up, their schools had more Asians and the hostility towards Asians in Britain had reduced. In this generation, it was the boys who tended to establish peer groups and street status within their neighbourhood, and so developed slightly less diverse social networks than the girls did. The girls in this younger generation were finding ways to keep their Punjabi identity while trying to navigate around some of the more conservative social restrictions of their cultures. They often did this by making contacts both inside and outside the community, e.g. volunteering at the BBC or elsewhere outside the community.

A classic study of social networks and language by Lesley Milroy (Milroy 1980) found the same social network pattern as found for these younger British Asians. Working class women in Belfast were found to have wider social networks than their male counterparts. The women worked in department stores and interacted with people from many different communities, whereas the men tended to have manual labour jobs that were located within their communities or involved working alongside their peers. So women's networks were crucial to the spread of new ways of speaking.

These British Asian data allow us not only to think about how new ways of speaking spread. People's speaking styles also tell us the history of a community: Despite all of these people being raised in London, the way they speak reflects the politics and social norms of their generation. The study shows many different ways of being Asian, all of which are related to the person's life experiences and identity.

Discussion points for students:

- Do you think you speak differently in different situations? Why?
- Can you think of cities or countries in which different ethnic groups have developed very different ways of speaking, and other situations where they do not? Why are there these differences across cases?
- All of the following can be associated with a specific identity group: pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar. Thinking about different social groups in the UK, what social factors might influence which of these is used as an identity markers?
- Have you noticed gender differences in men's and women's social worlds and networks in your community or your family? Or changes in how men's and women's networks are over time? Think of your own social networks, those of your parents' generation, and those of your grandparents' generation.
- The study described above found that, although people sound like they are choosing their own identity and personal style of being Asian, those styles were very similar across their age and gender group and actually related quite closely to changes in the political and social situation in West London. Thinking about your own way of speaking and your accent, how much of it do you think is 'determined' by factors beyond your control like this, and how much is a choice that you have made as part of your personal identity and style?
- If you are familiar with Multicultural London English (MLE), you may have noticed that none of these speakers have those new accent features. Why do you think the individuals here sound more distinctively Asian than MLE? (*hint: It relates to location, age, and class!*)
- Do you know any people like Anwar, with a wide range in how they speak? Why did they develop those styles?

References

Milroy, Lesley. 1980. *Language and Social Networks*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Sharma, Devyani. 2011. Style repertoire and social change in British Asian English. *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 15 (4): 464-492.