REEL TO REAL: DESI TEENS' LINGUISTIC ENGAGEMENTS WITH BOLLYWOOD[1]

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Abstract

Diasporic media, though widely discussed theoretically and occasionally ethnographically, are seldom explored with explicit attention to language. "Bollywood" films - feature-length movies produced and distributed in Bombay (Mumbai), India - are an excellent media source through which to examine linguistic anthropological topics of indexicality, bivalency, and identity in diasporic communities. In this paper, I analyze the circulation and consumption of Bollywood films - created in Hindi and subtitled in English - among South Asian-American (desi) communities in both Silicon Valley, CA and Queens, NY. Bollywood films are watched in family and peer groups, and portions of the films' songs and dialogue become incorporated into everyday speech practices. I present and analyze instances of Hindi film dialogue interwoven into conversational exchanges between desi teens in ways that impact negotiations of style and identity. For many teens, the films provide narrative frameworks, prescripted dialogue, and socially recognizable registers and varieties of affect through which they enact their own dynamics of humor, flirting, conflict, and other types of talk. Drawing on ethnographic and sociolinguistic data, I contrast how these processes vary between these two diasporic communities.

Keywords: Youth, Media, Language use, South Asian diaspora.

1. Introduction

Increasingly, scholars have paid attention to the social life of media in diasporic contexts, especially its role in fostering bonds of community and mediating identity while enabling connections to homeland and other diasporic locales. Often a backgrounded theme, language and the linguistic aspects of media consumption can be an important dimension of this process (Spitulnik 1997). Topics of intertextuality, indexicality, bivalency, and more broadly, identity formation have been sociolinguistically examined in the lives of youth, but seldom with explicit attention to the pervasive role of media in shaping language practices. In this paper I explore desi (South Asian American)[2] teens' social and linguistic engagements with "Bollywood" as

[2] *Desi* is a Hindi word which means "countryman." It is increasingly used by South Asians in diasporic locales to refer to one another. Based on the way youth in this paper use it, it includes people originally from South Asia who have immigrated to the US from Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, as well as Africa, the Caribbean, Fiji, and Great Britain. I use the term *desi* primarily because

well as other types of South Asian diasporic media. Bollywood, the world's most prolific film industry, produces films that are widely viewed in South Asia and beyond. Once a tongue-in-cheek name used by the English language media in India (Ganti 2004), the term Bollywood is now used worldwide to refer to Hindi-language films made in Bombay (renamed Mumbai in 1995). Serving simultaneously as visual culture, a social institution, as well as a linguistic resource for many diasporic youth, Bollywood films have deeply affected the everyday social lives of South Asians in the Subcontinent and worldwide. Even desi teens who may not be fluent in or have limited communicative competence in Hindi - the language of most Bollywood films - nonetheless draw linguistically on this rich and multifaceted medium.

Occupying a prime position in many teenagers' worlds, Bollywood films serve as a linguistic resource alongside various other types of media as well as genres of language. Bauman and Briggs (1992) examine the notion of "intertextuality" with special regard to genre. Building on work by Bakhtin (1981) and Bourdieu (1991), they argue that various genres of language are not mutually exclusive, but rather overlap with one another. Bollywood-based language practices are no exception; in fact, they epitomize the idea of intertextuality by toggling between spoken dialogue and fantasy-driven narratives set to song and dance. Likewise, teens engage with Bollywood in ways that enable them to move fluidly through different genres of talk, as well as different levels of reflexivity: From the use of Bollywood dialogue in direct as well as reported speech and the narration of their own lives through the stories of film characters, to the deployment of dialogue, film-specific registers, and song lyrics that index a shared sense of aesthetic tastes and communicative competence. Teens develop evaluative stances through talk as they report on-screen events and use stories and characters to narrate their own lives and dilemmas - a unique speech practice that links reel life to their real lives.

A central aspect of these processes is the notion of voice. Bakhtin's (1981) concept of heteroglossia explores how the same speaker can deploy a number of different types of voices, which can be expressed through register, lexicon, and other types of choices. Indeed, as Keane articulates, voice can be achieved through a range of linguistic means which "permit speakers to claim, comment on, or disavow different identities and evaluative stances at different moments" (1999: 272). This study of Bollywood-based language practices, like Hill's (1995) examination of Mexicanos' use of Don Gabriel's voice, explores how distinct voices and registers are deployed in various speech settings (see also Hill and Irvine 1992).

I examine these topics among desi teenagers in two distinct diasporic locales: Queens, NY, and Silicon Valley, CA. The diversity of religion, nationality, class, and geography underscore interesting similarities and differences between two South Asian American communities. Discussions of Silicon Valley are part of a larger research project in which I look at a range of practices into which media and language use are integrated, such as television, popular music, online activities, pagers, and consumption. I conducted ethnographic and sociolinguistic research for 16 months in three economically and sociolinguistically diverse schools and community settings. In this article, I primarily discuss data from Greene High School - which contained both lower-middle-class and upper-middle-class youth, and during the 1999-2000 school year had

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people tended to use it; I seldom, if ever heard the term "South Asian American" in conversation. Even more common than *desi*, however, were specific terms that people used to refer to nationality (such as "Indian" or "Pakistani") or to an ethnic, linguistic, or religious group (Gujarati, Tamil, Muslim, etc).

2648 students, of which approximately 15% were desi. Data presented here include spontaneously occurring conversation tape-recorded at lunch and break at school (for which I was not present), tape-recorded interviews, and participant observation during film viewings in homes and theater. Data about desi teens in Queens was collected during two years as a volunteer at a community-based youth center. Here, I spent approximately two to three hours per week in an informal atmosphere with primarily lower-middle-class youth from the surrounding neighborhoods. During my 18 months as a volunteer (1997-1999) I monitored a drop-in space with basketball, where I spoke primarily with boys, and was involved with some girls' and co-ed activities. Data presented here is based on recordings of spontaneously occurring conversations for which I was present, as well as participant-observations during film viewings at the youth center.

Drawing on these data, I examine various verbal repertoires that are based on or incorporate Bollywood language. They include reenacting humorous dialogue for comedic entertainment, inhabiting a particular character's voice, engaging in flirtatious dialogue with the opposite sex, and quoting film characters and themes that offer insight into their own lives. The indexical properties of film quotes incorporated into conversation rely on the recognition of certain stylistic registers of speaking typical to Hindi films. As I will discuss, aspects of this process occur differently according to gender, social class, linguistic background, as well as place, highlighting some of the similarities and differences between desi teens in Queens and Silicon Valley.

2. Teen language use

My examination of Bollywood-based language practices contributes to a growing literature on youth and language. Such inquiries offer insight into how groups actively constitute themselves around language practices, including multi-layered processes of social network formation (Eckert 1989) and ethnically specific styles (Mendoza-Denton 1996). There are different ways that teens define and perform desi identities, and such practices indicate ethnic allegiances (Back 1996; Baumann 1996) and draw attention to the fluid nature of racial and ethnic meanings across social contexts (Rampton 1995). Several factors contributed to how teens related to languages spoken with family and community members. Generally, there tended to be considerable variation according to religion, social class, and gender, as well as whether they were older or younger siblings in their family (Shankar 2003). Teens' language use often closely followed that of their family and community environments, as I discuss below.

Desi teens I studied in Silicon Valley ranged from first- to fourth-generation, although most were second- or third-generation. They hailed from working-class families whose grandparents labored in peach orchards in Yuba city and parents worked on assembly lines in Silicon Valley, as well as upper-middle-class families whose parents immigrated from South Asia and held lucrative upper-level management jobs at high tech companies. The most represented group in Silicon Valley was Punjabi-speaking Sikhs, followed by Gujarati-speaking Hindus, and Hindi/Urdu-speaking Muslims from Pakistan, India, and Fiji. Nearly all Sikh teens spoke Punjabi fluently and tended to use Punjabi more with peers in school. Muslim teens were also fluent in Bengali, Urdu, or Hindi but their language use at school - i.e. whether they spoke to their peers in these languages or in English - varied according to class background.

Hindu teens were the least likely to be fluent in their heritage language and seldom spoke it with their peers. In part this seemed to be beyond their control, for in many situations, these teens hailed from a number of different linguistic groups and were unable to form a critical mass of other teens who spoke their language. At the Queens youth center, the primarily first- and second-generation teens I studied were far more fluent in their heritage language as well as Hindi, which many of them studied in school in South Asia before moving to the US. Most were Hindi/Urdu or Gujarati speakers, with a number of teens from Guyana and Trinidad who were far less fluent in Hindi, but still picked up words, phrases, and songs from viewings at the youth center. These youth were primarily from working-class families and lived in urban diverse neighborhoods in Queens.

Queens and Silicon Valley are both extremely diverse, linguistically vibrant places. In both Silicon Valley and Queens, a number of teens are bilingual in English and their heritage language. In some cases, this language is Hindi or Urdu, which are morphologically similar but can vary lexically and phonetically, depending on the speaker.[3] Most second-generation teens have not formally studied Hindi. If at least one parent is a first-generation immigrant, however, there is a strong chance this parent may have studied Hindi in India or Urdu in Pakistan.[4] In addition to this bilingualism, teens acquire linguistic skills that reflect a wide range of communicative competencies (including various registers and genres) that are linked to different social identities, activities, and practices (see Romaine 1995; Zentella 1997).

Working class teens in both Queens and Silicon Valley displayed higher levels of spoken and comprehensive fluency in their heritage language than upper-middle class teens. As I discuss in detail elsewhere (Shankar 2003), many working-class teens' parents did not speak English fluently and therefore these teens spoke in their heritage language to parents and elder relatives, and in English to their siblings. In contrast, upper-middle-class teens in Silicon Valley often spoke English and their heritage language with their parents, as their parents were often fluent in both. As a result, working-class teens as well as those with at least one parent who did not speak English fluently were more confident and likely to speak their heritage language with peers.

Three types of language practices I observed are code-switching - the process by which speakers alternate between two or more languages in conversation (Auer 1998; Gal 1987; Milroy and Muysken 1995); code-mixing - the use of words and phrases from more than one language during a conversation (Heller 1999); and the use of Indian-accented English (Rampton 1995; see also Chun, this volume). The latter two occurred especially among teens who were less fluent in speaking a particular language variety.

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[3] It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss in detail the social and ideological significance of Hindi and Urdu in the South Asian context. Hindi is a language taught and spoken in many parts of India, and Urdu is the national language of Pakistan. Both are Indo-European languages, share a morphological structure, and are mutually intelligible. Lexically, Urdu draws on Farsi, and Hindi from Sanskrit, a detail that has increasingly factored into each country's struggle to establish a nationalist identity that distinguishes itself from its neighbor. As such, part of India's nationalist agenda includes replacing Hindi's Urdu borrowings with Sanskrit-based synonyms. This agenda, however, has not been systematically executed in Hindi films, for many of the films' songwriters and composers are Urdu poets. Moreover, in an effort to keep the films intelligible to the masses and have the spoken dialogue reflect lived reality, speakers in films often switch between Hindi and Urdu, much as average speakers in India might.

[4] Even within India, there is resistance to Hindi as a national language, especially in South India, where people speak Dravidian-based languages rather than the Indo-European varieties spoken in North India.

These teens created shared knowledge bases around their particular language uses. Madhu and Neetu, for example, explained that while they sometimes speak in Punjabi when they do not want people to understand them. Neetu explained, "We put our 'ings' and 'eds' after every action – I was '*dekh*ing' [looking], I was '*sunn*ing' [listening]. We both have the same level of speaking, so we can use it suddenly if we need to." Such group-specific talk functions as a form of insider language in the context of a range of other practices that contribute to the construction and expression of style.

Hindi-language Bollywood films are a prime source from which these communicative means are developed. Many desi teens who did not speak Hindi at home but had a working knowledge of it reported that they picked it up by watching Hindi films. A number of youth largely credit films for facilitating their communicative competence in Hindi/Urdu. Teens who spoke a language from the Indo-European family - such as Punjabi, Gujarati, or Bengali, among others - often had a quicker and easier time picking up Hindi by watching Hindi films. In contrast, many desi youth who spoke Dravidian languages such as Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, and Malayalam reported that Hindi was completely unfamiliar sounding and that it bore little resemblance to their heritage language. Some of these teens relied entirely on subtitles to watch, while others reported that their lack of comprehension kept them from enjoying the films at all.

Teens who were able to pick up Hindi solely from films were rarely able to converse fluently in it; they were, however, able to incorporate dialogues, phrases, and song lyrics from these films into conversation. This occurred through heavy reliance on English subtitles available on DVDs and/or their parents' and peers' translations to decipher meanings of songs and dialogue beyond their immediate grasp. Even within these largely bilingual contexts, it may seem counterintuitive that non-Hindi-speaking teens would watch Hindi-language Bollywood films, a medium for which they require a new set of language skills. In Queens, keeping up with other teens at the youth center was important, and even if non-Hindi speakers could not produce dialogue or utterances themselves, they could at least follow the conversations around them. In Silicon Valley, the resounding popularity of Hindi films among some desi teens made outliers a minority. A closer look at the Bollywood and other diasporic media will provide proper context for the examples I discuss in the upcoming sections.

2.1. *Bollywood worldwide*

Recent ethnographic work examines "how media are embedded in people's quotidian lives" (Ginsburg et al 2002: 2) by connecting its consumption to larger processes of nationalism (Abu-Lughod 1995), youth culture (Liechty 2002), and transnationalism (Gillespie 1995). Anderson (1991) outlines the historical construction of the "imagined community" as a way in which individuals imagine a connection to one another and envision themselves as part of a larger group in the absence of face-to-face contact. This concept has been especially useful in illustrating how media and language are both vital elements of community construction. Using Anderson's concept, Spitulnik (1997) offers an insightful examination of what she has termed "the social circulation of media discourse." She discusses how Zambians draw on radio show dialogue and personality by incorporating phrases, types of turn-taking and other verbal styles into their own speech practices. Community is mediated by public imitations of particular styles of greetings and seemingly non-sequitur remarks that are trademarks of certain radio hosts

and announcers. Spitulnik examines the larger conditions that enable "decontextualization" and "recontextualization," that result in the production of shared meaning. As the most widely-consumed medium in Zambia, radio naturally has a larger Zambian national following than Bollywood has in the South Asian diaspora. Indeed, nationally broadcast radio in English and ChiBemba, the country's most widely spoken languages, enjoys a distribution and loyal fan base that privately-produced Bollywood films can only hope to find in India, let alone diasporic contexts. Despite these important differences of audience and reach, there are some important similarities between the social circulation of Zambian radio discourse and Bollywood-based talk. As I will discuss in detail, teen engagements with Bollywood resonate with Spitulnik's discussion of how people engage with, employ, and enjoy various media discourses that increase sociability and connectedness.

Connections between media and diaspora have been theorized by Appadurai (1996) and explored in ethnographic detail in a range of settings, including examinations of nostalgia and nationalism through diasporic television with Iranian exiles in Los Angeles (Naficy 1993) and connections to homeland through Croatian "video letters" sent by family members to diasporic relatives (Kolar-Panov 1996). In both these studies, the media examined is primarily created for diasporic residents, and small-scale video productions as well as television programming imported from a homeland create a localized sense of community. Bollywood, however, has somewhat different objectives and scope. Historically, Hindi films have been produced for viewers in South Asia. As such, the audience, which is imagined as part of the production process (c.f. Ang 1996; Dornfeld 1998), is distinctly Indian.[5] Certain themes, genres, and narratives predominate in these films, including moral dilemmas of good versus evil, purity and chastity for women, sacrifice of individual desires for the larger good of the family, respecting elders, and preserving the sanctity of one's community (see Joshi 2002; Prasad 2001). These dramas, along with action and suspense thrillers, have enjoyed immense popularity in South Asia as well as abroad. In recent years, however, the production has expanded to imagine the diaspora as a key audience segment in the production process (Ganti 2002). Indeed, marketability in the diaspora is an increasing consideration for Bollywood filmmakers and this trend is an important aspect of cinematic appeal to many of the youth in this paper.

Hindi films are popular among communities worldwide (Larkin 1997; Liechty 1995) and actively watched in the desi diaspora. Ray (2000) investigates the popularity of Hindi films among South Asians in Fiji. Indeed, the film stars, songs, and other aspects of this cinematic form seeped into various aspects of Fijian public culture, including local print media and various community events. Bollywood films mediated community for many families and also served as a preferred form of entertainment. In Gillespie's (1995) study of a Southall, England Punjabi community during the late 1980s and 1990s, Hindi films were quite popular among teens and their parents. Gillespie discusses the gendered popularity of these films, citing a greater interest on the part of girls versus boys. She also notes the role of the VCR as a means by which movies are viewed by families together at home, fostering intergenerational contact. In Silicon Valley, especially, I found that families regularly gathered around their televisions to view films together on video and, increasingly, on DVD.

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[5] For a detailed discussion of the production process in Hindi films, see Ganti (2000).

Most teenage Hindi film fans in Silicon Valley and Queens began watching Hindi films at home with their parents on the VCR, but now watch Hindi films with their friends as well, both at home and in theaters. Both Silicon Valley and Queens have local movie theatres that play the latest releases. For some families, taking the entire family to the movies can be an economic burden, especially considering how many new movies are released in a year. While new releases used to take months before they were officially released on video, DVD releases are now nearly if not completely simultaneous with theater releases. Viewers can either rent DVDs or the crystal-clear, commercial free videos copied directly from DVD, and keep up with all the latest releases without ever going to a theater. Unlike American rental stores such as Blockbuster or Hollywood video that specialize solely in visual culture, many local South Asian grocery stores also double as a movie rental and soundtrack retail centers. With video and DVD rentals as inexpensive as $1 and $3 respectively and loosely enforced late fees, families often rent two or three titles at a time. These stores, along with mail-order DVD rental subscriptions such as "Netflix," make renting films easier than ever. Many families taped their DVDs onto videotapes while watching, thereby creating a vast library of titles from which to choose for repeat viewing.

Teenage Bollywood fans I observed enjoyed long discussions about films and *filmi*[6] gossip, and knew one another's preferences and dislikes quite specifically. The internet is an especially viable space in which Hindi film tastes are constructed and reinforced. Teens use it to learn about and preview new film releases, chat online about film stars and cast votes for film awards. Teens and their families follow film releases online and download Hindi songs from internet music sites. As the average film has at least six songs, these music and dance interludes are especially important to fans. Within the movie, they work alongside dialogue by narrating parts of the story and advancing plot lines. Often they say what is unspeakable between characters, or illustrate subtext and hidden desires. Outside of the film, songs contribute to the movie's appeal. Especially popular songs are replayed on DVD (whose menus are programmed for just such revisiting), heard in cars, on Discmans, and at parties, and are used in teens' own dance productions. Popular tunes are so ubiquitous that my viewing of *Kal Ho Na Ho* at a Bombay theater was frequently interrupted by cell phone ringtones playing the movie's theme song.

Although teens of various class, linguistic, religious, and geographic backgrounds express avid interest in Bollywood films, how the films are incorporated into everyday talk and social life varies. In the following sections, I will explore various examples of this process.

2.2. *The language of cinematic appeal*

Among many desi teens in Silicon Valley and Queens, Hindi films are as popular as Hollywood films, and film knowledge is privileged. A closer look at the nature of these films and elements of their popularity will shed light on this trend. There are many competing visions of modernity in Hindi films, but several recent films made in the 1990s and 2000s seem especially relevant to these youth. The modern, hip youth culture

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[6] *Filmi*, an adjective used to discuss aspects of Bollywood movies, uses the adopted English word film with the Hindi feminine adjectival ending "i".

and lifestyles portrayed in recent hits *Dil To Pagal Hai* and *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* as well as the Bollywood trend of featuring desis in London, Los Angeles and New York have made films such as *Dilwale Dulhuniya Le Jayenge, Pardes,* and *Kal Ho Na Ho* immensely popular among desi teens in this study. The main characters in these films are young, attractive, and clad in designer clothes popular among desi teens - including Tommy Hilfiger, Gap, Adidas, and DKNY. Featuring youth as consumers, these films portray a set of leisure activities that are relatively new additions to youth lives in South Asia, including shopping as a social activity, co-ed basketball, modern dance performances, DJ-ed parties, and cheerleading. These more recent Hindi films portray a global youth culture, which resonates with desi teens in both Silicon Valley and Queens. Relatedly, the popularity of non-Bollywood desi films, which are primarily in English, such as *My Beautiful Launderette, Bhaji on the Beach*, *American Desi*, and *Bend It Like Beckham* indicates how well these depictions of desis in the diaspora resonate with teen viewers. Such films are often coming of age stories which explore–complex issues around relationships with parents, friendship, and especially romance, in various diasporic locales. Although these films are primarily in English, characters do code-switch between English and other South Asian languages - an aspect that teens immediately recognize and appreciate.

While being hip and trendy is certainly a selling point for these films, perhaps even more provocative are the balanced lives of the characters. Unlike depictions of American romance, which feature premarital sex and dating, and do not foreground loyalty to the family, romantic interaction portrayed in Hindi films appeals to the sensibility of teens' everyday lives, and generally follows the same cultural codes in which they have been raised. Especially in romantic comedies, a favorite genre among boys and girls I spoke with, film heroes and heroines are often able to achieve the impossible balancing act of fulfilling familial duty and obligation while participating in the seductive lure of consumption, leisure, and young romance. As the most trying challenges are love triangles and unrequited love, they make everyday teen life, especially dealing with parental rules and restrictions, difficulties of school life, and anxiety about the future, seem less daunting. Characters face versions of these problems but ultimately resolve them in a way that many teens find inspiring. Although the clothing may be skimpier than what many teenage desi girls are permitted to wear, the characters are often subject to the same sorts of restrictions and obligations as desi teens in the US.

When teens discuss what makes a good movie, they talk about how they are able to relate to them. Favorite couples and actors are the object of much discussion and admiration. They admire the characters, the way they look and speak Hindi, as well as the actors and actresses that play them.[7] In this sense, part of the appeal of Hindi films for teens is that they provide role models to whom teens can relate. For example, many girls mentioned their favorite Bollywood movie actresses - such as Aishwarya Rai, Karishma Kapoor, and Urmila - as important counterpoints to American teen idols like Britney Spears and Jennifer Lopez. While these American icons are certainly admired, having desi role models, many of whom have dark hair and dark eyes, is equally

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[7] Seeing the stars in movies and in magazines pales in comparison to the chance to see them live at a Bollywood show. Various actors and actresses team up to lip-sync and dance to popular songs from their films. Held in large stadiums and arenas, these shows draw in huge crowds. Generally teens attend with their parents, in groups of families, although good seating to these shows can be out of many families' budgets.

important. When boys and girls can find desi visions of attractiveness rather than remaining exclusively in the realm of Hollywood, they feel better about their own self-image. Unfortunately, most of the Hindi film actresses have become uniformly thin and very light-skinned, often with lightened hair. Still, they are notably South Asian, in their looks as well as their speech. Bollywood actors are also important. As a balance to American action heroes such as Bruce Willis or Arnold Schwarzenegger, boys looked up to desi action stars as well. Avinash, a Silicon Valley sophomore, explains, "I used to be a Shah Rukh Khan fan, but this new guy Hrithik Roshan is off da' hook. He's built, he can act, *and* he can dance."

In order to be a believable character, the actor or actress must not only be desi, but have a good command of a South Asian language. For example, in a discussion of the film *American Desi*, Greene High School students Pinki and Nidhi debated the authenticity of the female lead based on her linguistic skills. Pinki asserted that "Nina" is a believable character because she seems to have some knowledge of Indian culture but is also savvy about her American life. Nidhi raised a strong critique of the character, arguing that although "Nina" claims to know all about Indian culture and teach it to others, "She says one line in Hindi and she can't even speak it right!" Other actors and actresses, despite their light skin, hair, and eyes that skew closer to Caucasian rather than average South Asian features, maintain their credibility by being able to speak Hindi fluently. Characters who do not claim authoritative cultural knowledge, however, are pardoned. For example, Nidhi and Pinki accepted that the male lead "Kris" in *American Desi* knew as little about Indian culture or language as he claimed, and therefore excused his linguistic foibles and social gaffes. Such critiques underscore the importance of language use in connecting the actors and actresses to the roles they play on screen.

3. Quoting Bollywood

Hindi films provide a rich resource and creative arena for language practices. Through the circulation of films, languages, and cultural forms, themes are selected and reinserted in other social contexts and as such offer ideological narratives and communicative resources through which youth variously express themselves (e.g., by adopting dialogue, songs, dances, styles to be performed). The musical performance genre indexes a certain type of desi identity. In Queens, for example, a group of teens wrote their own song in Hindi and added a dancehall interlude. The narrative of the song and the corresponding picture depicted a memory about a love lost, and showed flashbacks about how they met, and courted each other, but ultimately did not end up together. Following Bollywood stylistic conventions, the reel couple only barely held hands. The song lyrics and the style of singing resemble many popular Hindi duets of alternating male and female roles. The intertextual and productive value of these diasporic media are also seen in multicultural day performances in schools (see Shankar 2004) as well as community dance and music performances, which both incorporate a wide range of popular styles from Hindi films and local popular music.

Although many desi teenagers in Silicon Valley and Queens who watch Hindi movies cannot independently converse in Hindi, they often incorporate humorous passages, romantic dialogues, and song lyrics from Hindi films into their everyday

conversational practices. The following discussion explores Bollywood-based talk that occurs during viewing and during other times and places.

3.1. *During viewing*

Vocally interacting with a Bollywood film is not solely a teen phenomenon. Ethnographic research on film viewing in Indian theaters reports that audiences cheer, hiss, and speak to characters on screen (Srinivas 1998). Diasporic film viewing proves to be no different, as particular types of language use are a significant component of group viewings. Whether the viewing is on a VCR or DVD at home, or in a local theater in New York or California, audience members often take vocal liberties that would be frowned upon while viewing Hollywood movies. Such verbal practices occur differently during viewings with peers versus with family, and between boys and girls. Among their peers, kids tend to offer uncensored commentary about who is good looking, make risqué jokes, and sing unabashedly. Such was a case during a 1998 screening of *Dil to Pagal Hai* 'The heart is crazy,' at the Queens youth center. The pirated videotape without subtitles and commercials spliced into the film was played on a color TV in a small lounge. Most of this co-ed audience had seen it on video at least once before, and a few girls said they had seen it five times. The girls sat near each other in the front, and the boys at a slight distance from them.

The opening credits of the film feature a series of shots of couples sitting on a bench, some embracing or kissing. Although there is much embracing, innuendo, and even wet *sari* dances, kissing on the lips is seldom shown. Picking up on this vaguely risqué theme, several of the boys began hooting and making catcalls. Aamir, a 17-year-old Pakistani American boy, joked, "This is setting a bad example for kids!" Encouraged by laughter from his peers, he quipped, "*Kya, unko sharam nehi athe?*" 'Don't they feel ashamed?' The rest of the film ensued with frequent commentary and jokes from the boys, and plenty of laughing from the girls. At moments they recited lines of comedic dialogue synchronously with the characters, often giggling after. During the songs, girls and boys sang along loudly to the corresponding male and female parts. At moments, a boy and girl would sing to each other, mimicking a reel romantic duet, but would then burst into laughter and turn away.

When teens watched movies with parents and family, they also verbally interacted with the film, albeit in a more restrained manner. When Tara, a senior at a Silicon Valley high school, went to see a Bollywood film at a Bay Area theater with her parents, they invited me along. Tara and her father, the most avid fans in the family, chose to see *Refugee*, an action film with a romantic subplot. A main draw for this movie was that it featured Abishek Bacchan, son of Bollywood screen legend Amitabh Bacchan. We listened to a preview of the film's songs on CD in the car ride over, and like others in the theater, Tara's father sang along to the songs, whose tunes and lyrics he had researched on the internet prior to viewing. In contrast to the peer viewing in Queens or to other film viewings with Tara's friends, she was far less vocal in this screening with her parents. She quietly hummed along to the songs, and quietly shared her opinions about who was good looking and whose outfits were pleasing with me.

Such interactions with films during viewing indicate a far more detailed engagement with words, lyrics, and themes than a passive viewing. As such, the type of talk that occurs during the film - especially reciting dramatic dialogue, enacting comedy

routines, and singing along with songs - anticipates the incorporation of such verbal practices in talk outside these viewing contexts.

3.2. *Outside of viewing contexts*

Enjoying Hindi films in the ways discussed above is thus a participatory activity dependent upon linguistic skills and contextual knowledge to generate and appreciate shared viewings. Dramatic dialogue, comedic routines, and romantic lyrics that are consistent with the rest of the film during viewing stand apart as their own *filmi* registers outside of viewing contexts. Indeed, the affect, intonation, and stylized speech that make Bollywood distinctive are immediately recognizable as such to the trained ear. The juxtaposition of such stylized speech interspersed with everyday Northern California or New York City teenage English can be especially stark. Stylized speech, as Coupland (2001) illustrates in his discussion of dialect stylization in radio talk, can be employed in ways that create and cater to a community of listeners that is trained to recognize certain stylized accents and turns of phrase. Likewise, if executed well, a stylized utterance from a Bollywood register can easily create the desired dramatic effect to a receptive audience.

The following is an excerpt from a taped spontaneous conversation during lunch at Green High School during Spring 2001. It features Simran, a girl in her junior year who wore a tape-recorder and clip-on microphone for me for a week, and three boys in her class, Kapil, KB and Uday, all of whom are Punjabi speakers. The conversation begins with Simran and Uday are discussing a film they each saw on video with their families over the weekend. Kapil and KB join them, and Simran changes the topic to inform them that she is tape-recording their conversation.

(1) "Doesn't he remind you of that guy?"[8]

	Simran:	Whatever you're talking is getting recorded. Remember what Shalini told us
2		yesterday?
	Kapil:	Ooooooohhhh! Are you serious?
4	Simran:	It doesn't matter though, 'cause only she's gonna listen to it.
	Kapil:	[directly into the tape recorder microphone] *Neehiii! Main tera koon kilaun*
6		'Nooooo! I'm going to murder you/drink your blood!' [in a *filmi* villain
		register].
8		[Simran, Uday, and KB burst out laughing].
	Uday:	[regarding the tape recorder] It gonna seem like y'all are going crazy, ain't
10		it?

Simran: [laughing, Simran turns to Uday and remarks about Kapil] Doesn't he
12   remind you of that guy [referring to a character in the film she and Uday
           were discussing earlier]?

In the above conversational except, Kapil employed a *filmi* register that was immediately recognizable to his friends. He created a comedic moment out of being asked to tolerate the tape recorder and masterfully reproduced the affect of an enraged Bollywood character. Rather than using his own voice, he used a deep, gravelly, drawling register associated with a Bollywood villain to create a light and comical response. Moreover, it skillfully conveyed Kapil's irritation about the tape recorder and possible homicidal feelings toward the anthropologist that may have been inappropriate to declare directly. Moving from reel to real, Kapil used this register to create a balance of wit, humor, and annoyance.

Reel flirting is another type of dialogue used in real co-ed interactions. Using dialogue and song lyrics indexes particular *filmi* conventions that give this practice several levels of meaning. For example, conversational code-switching can reveal gender dynamics that resonate with romantic stances taken in film. When boys flirt with girls using subtly suggestive phrases of Punjabi or Hindi, drawing on *filmi* conventions, girls can playfully yet demurely refuse to engage in such banter and answer back in English. Girls who reply in English in this way are replicating a pattern of linguistic interaction common to Hindi films, and are indexing themselves as being correct, polite, and pure, partly as a put-down to the rowdy, improper male who code-switches. Yet these same girls comfortably code-switch when gossiping among themselves or speaking with relatives, demonstrating that youth are strategic in their code choices.

Especially in the desi context, where there are numerous social and parental restrictions placed on interacting with the opposite sex, let alone dating (see Maira 2002), prescripted dialogues of flirting in movies are used by teens in their own conversations. Kabeer, a seventeen-year-old boy from a strict Muslim family and Sadhna, a sixteen-year-old Gujarati girl whose parents do not let them date, have found a way to interact at the Queens youth center. Although they are friends and claim that they are not romantically interested in each other, Sadhna and Kabeer are among a few pairs of teens that I have heard employing *filmi* flirting sequences. "*Kya, maine Robbie ka party main dekhi* 'Haven't I seen you before, at Robbie's party?'" Kabeer leaned into Sadhna and asked, barely able to keep a straight face. "*Main? Really?* 'Me? Really?'" Sadhna giggled back, immediately recognizing a pick-up line that Raj, the lead character in the popular film *Diliwale Dulhuniya Le Jayenge* played by desi heartthrob Shah Rukh Kahn, uses on several swooning girls until he unexpectedly falls for the one who rebuffs his advances.

In addition to these social uses, Bollywood narratives also resonate on personal levels. These films offer narrative frameworks and linguistic resources through which youth imagine the trajectory of romantic events in their own lives, and as such, play a key role in how teens negotiate aspects of their own dilemmas. They see ways in which characters balance the difficult process of selectively adopting elements from various cultural sources that enable them to explore flirting, dating, and romance, but ultimately maintain familial and gendered codes of propriety. Great onscreen couples who are able to overcome religious or ethnic differences, have a "love marriage" rather than an arranged one, and otherwise manage to please their families and act within the social boundaries of their communities without sacrificing true romance are considered ideal

by teens. Unlike their counterparts in American media, who are generally free to engage in social and physical relations with whomever they choose, most desi teens are forbidden not only to date at all, but to publicly socialize with the opposite sex. Further, the concept of arranged marriage, or its more modern incarnation of being introduced to and expected to marry someone of one's own religious, linguistic, and caste background is still quite commonplace and seldom discussed or illustrated in American public culture. Whether teens follow these rules or quietly break them, there is scant room for discussion of such issues except among trusted friends. Reel couples in Bollywood movies, then, can fill in where real life falls short.

Narrative frameworks offered by Hindi films, especially certain dialogues, can be especially instrumental to youth who are experiencing similar situations. During the screening at the youth center discussed above, Aamir told me his story of unrequited love about an hour into the on-screen love story. He pondered a main premise of the film - that God creates people in pairs and they find each other - and discussed this idea with me during a scene in the movie where the character "Maya" talks to her friend who is preparing to have an arranged marriage. "*Pyaar hota hai?*" 'Love just happens?' Aamir asked, quoting a conversation in the film between the heroine Maya and her friend. In this scene, Maya's friend explains to her that it is the duty of Indian women to marry someone their family deems suitable and *pyaar hota hai* along the way. Tormented by conflicting thoughts on the subject, Maya verbalizes a conflicting opinion that only true love should precipitate marriage.

Verbalizing connections between film dialogue and events with his own life, Aamir explained that he used to believe in arranged marriage, until he fell in love. Quoting the film's character Raj (played by Shah Rukh Kahn), he reveals, "I used to be like Shah Rukh, asking '*Mohabbat kya hai*?' 'What is love?', and not believing in it, until I met her. Now I don't think about things the same." During a subsequent scene, when an old childhood friend of Maya's who loves her romantically but whom she only loves platonically, Aamir sighed loudly. Aamir's narratives here mirror that of the movie characters. The particulars of the film's story line - arranged marriage versus love marriage, *pyaar* 'love, more generally' versus *mohabbat* 'love for a beloved', and obligation to family - provided a culturally meaningful scheme through which Aamir can make sense of his own plight of familial restrictions and unrequited love. Significant too is the way in which Aamir employed lines of dialogue from the movie into his own talk during the viewing, drawing upon characters and quotes in his own narration of self.

4. Referencing Bollywood and beyond

The above discussions explore specific references to Bollywood dialogue, register, and quotes. Other language practices, however, also express various types of connectedness and membership. Using Indian-accented English is a popular linguistic choice for nearly all teens, but especially for upper middle class teens in Silicon Valley, who occasionally code-mix but rarely code-switch. More often, they use Indian-accented English and words or ways of speaking exclusive to their social group. For many of these teens, referring to language and speaking in Indian-accented English can signify group membership. Rampton (1995) discusses how youth of different ethnicities in the UK use language to "cross" into groups into which they seek membership. While youth in my

study use Indian-accented English within their groups, doing so enables them to amuse one another (see Chun, this volume, for a similar discussion). They also do so in order to assert differences from their parents, whose accents they are often mimicking.

Accents, as well as other types of references, can only accomplish their intended effect (most often humor and in-group connectedness) if others are able to detect the intended indexical references. Participants must not only have particular types of cultural knowledge, but in the case of Bollywood, a well-trained ear to recognize and associate otherwise mundane words, phrases, and sounds. Barthes (1972) and other semioticians have noted that the "connotative" or "second-order value" of an utterance enables a range of interpretations. Such utterances can be "polysemic" or capable of numerous context-sensitive meanings. Even seemingly insignificant utterances can actually be imbued with a wide range of meanings to listeners. Such is the case with the example below, where there is more to a cough than what initially appears.

4.1. *Indexical references*

Accents, words, and even sounds can have indexical value in these closely knit desi social circles. As the following excerpt illustrates, a seemingly innocent cough, mimicked in the style of actress Madhuri Dixit's coy, flirtatious throat clearing in the immensely popular film *Hum Apke Hain Kaun!* 'Who am I to you!,' leads to rounds of laughter. Pinki taped the recording during a twenty minute mid-morning break at Greene High School. In the section featured below, she and her four friends Janvi, Raminder, Renu, and Harbans are transitioning from discussing a tongue-twisting acronym that one of them invented for a test. Taking turns to see who can recite it the fastest and bursting into laughter each time, they eventually tire of that topic. The transcript begins with Harbans' attempt to move the group on to a new topic.

(2) 'Ahmmm-ahmmm'

	Harbans:	Aaaanyway
2	Janvi:	Aaaannnyywaaayss. Ahm- ahmmmm [throat clearing].
	Raminder:	They're like…
4	Janvi:	Allll rightyyy.
	Raminder:	I was teasing my mom yesterday
6	Janvi:	/ ahmmm-ahmmm. [two distinct coughs rather than one long one]
8	Renu:	[giggles] ahmmm-ahmmm
	Pinki:	/ ahmmm-ahmmm
10	Janvi:	What is this movie?
	Pinki:	ahmmm-ahmmm
12	Raminder:	It's from *Hum Apke Hain Kaun!*, uhooo-uhoo [exactly like the movie].
	Pinki:	uhooo-uhoo [in a higher pitch]
14	Renu:	/ shut up- shut-up! [giggles]
	Raminder:	No, she goes: uhooo-uhoo [like the movie].

Raminder and Renu continued with the joke until the other three girls tired of it and requested to change the subject. During the portion of the exchange excerpted above,

the girls quickly picked up on an everyday cough and took it as a distinctive verbal cue from film dialogue. The reel quote, "uhoo-uhoo" is less of an actual cough and more of a demure, flirtatious noise that actress Madhuri Dixit makes when interacting with actor Salman Khan, her love interest in the film. It begins as a distinctive, feminine cough that enables the actress to cover her mouth, giggle, and bat her eyelids - all things Madhuri Dixit does especially well - and soon becomes a mode of interaction, as Salman Khan begins to echo the "uhoo-uhoo" cough as a flirtatious response.

The utterance takes on a life of its own that extends far beyond its reel presence. In the above excerpt, an actual, everyday throat-clearing and cough is recontextualized as movie quote by the subsequent moves of Renu and Pinki. Equally significant is the fact that Janvi recognizes their imitation of her as not simply teasing, but a reference to a movie. Girls teasing one another about the sounds they make is hardly unusual, as the rounds of "aaaanyway" that start this exchange indicate. The noteworthy aspect, however, is that Janvi, the girl being teased, quickly identifies this as a movie quote. Only a few of the girls could immediately identify the film and accurately replicate the sound, but the others quickly understood the reference. The indexical value of this utterance enabled a particularly humorous situation for those who could identify the cough as a film quote. Moreover, it enabled girls who were less comfortable quoting dialogue to immediately participate in the banter, thereby creating a truly shared source of amusement. This exchange underscores the pervasiveness of quoting Bollywood as a cultural and linguistic practice among these desi teens.

4.2. *Bivalent homophonic puns*

Another teen language practice that relies on insider knowledge the use of "bivalent homophonic puns."[9] Woolard (1999) examines the concept of "bivalency," in which words have meaning in two distinct languages. I here use the term in conjunction with homophones - words that are phonetically similar, if not identical, in both languages (or Indian accents of both languages). While such word-play has been examined in second-language learning word play (Tarone et al 1994), I here look at it in relation to everyday talk as well as media-specific language practices.

In one instance, Sheetal, a 17 year-old Gujarati girl in Silicon Valley, told her friends Nandini, Meena, and me about a humorous incident. The joke is a play on the homophones "guy" - the English word for man - and "*gai*" - the Hindi word for cow. Barely able to contain her laughter, Sheetal giggled about how her uncle in San Jose had seen a dead cow in his neighbor's backyard and called his neighbor. In a thick Indian accent, she mimicked, "There is a dead *gai* in your backyard!" and then inserted in her regular voice, "Because, you know, the Indian word for cow is *gai*" and switched back into the accent, "There is a dead *gai* in your backyard!" She completed the anecdote by explaining that when her uncle's neighbor started getting hysterical, he realized his error and said, "I mean cow! There is a dead cow in your backyard."

In a media-based example from a diasporic film, Harsimran, a sophomore at Greene High School, shares one of his favorite scenes from the film *American Desi* with his friends Uday and Ranvir at lunch. In this scene, a Punjabi man wearing a turban is dancing at a party with a multiracial population. As he raises his arms and shakes his

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[9] Norma Mendoza-Denton and Bambi B. Schieffelin, personal correspondence.

shoulders, he jovially cries out "*Ho*! *Ho*!" a common Punjabi utterance when dancing. Harsimran imitates the dance while he impersonates the various voices for his friends: "They're all like, '*Ho*! *Ho*!'" [while snapping fingers dancing with *bhangra* hand gestures] 'Ho?' [in an American-accented female voice] 'You callin' me a fuckin' ho?' Some black lady goes, 'Who you fuckin' callin' ho?'" Uday and Ranvir were highly amused by this performance.

Harsimran's reenactment of this movie scene and Sheetal's telling of the "dead *gai*" joke are more than humorous anecdotes shared among friends. They are verbal performances that demand particular kinds of linguistic knowledge. In Sheetal's telling of the joke, her friends begin laughing as soon as she finishes mimicking her uncle's first line, making her next statement in which she explains the meaning of *gai* superfluous. The joke is effective, then, because her friends immediately recognize the comic value in the bivalent homophonic pun *gai*/ guy. Likewise, Harsimran, Uday, and Ranvir are entertained by the way the *ho*, a celebratory word uttered while dancing, is a homophone with the American slang term "ho," a shortened version of "whore" popularized by African-American hip-hop artists. The pun is especially effective because an African American woman misrecognizes the general shouting of *ho*! to be an insult directed at her. As these two examples indicate, bivalent homophones truly become puns during these contexts of retelling. Their double meanings are only elucidated and appreciated by those outside the original context of occurrence. Desi teens engaging in such linguistic practices must possess the bilingual competence to decipher the meaning of each individual term in order to appreciate the humor generated by the pun. Such mutual recognition allows such bivalent homophonic punning to be a significant and amusing language practice among these desi teens.

5. Conclusion

Bollywood film, as a medium, creates common ground between youth of disparate religious, national, and linguistic communities, because they not only share such commonalities, but talk about them as well. Indeed, the Bollywood language practices of quoting dialogue, using *filmi* registers for humor and flirting, and engaging with songs and lyrics create a media-based community. Recent Bollywood films that showcase the lives of the South Asian diaspora portray teen subjectivity, to which many strongly relate. Indeed, in the case of a member-driven organization such as the youth center in Queens, Bollywood connects teens from different parts of the diaspora by creating shared frames of reference in conversation. Likewise, Silicon Valley teens of different linguistic backgrounds seek out ways to incorporate aspects of Bollywood into their everyday lives and talk, enabling a shared frame of reference requiring specialized and insider knowledge. With current Bollywood films being increasingly or even entirely set among South Asian diasporic communities, reel life promises to maintain a steady place in the real linguistic and social practices of desi teens.

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