Transnational belonging over time in a British Asian community
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The potential (ir)relevance of transnational identity to later generations in migrant communities remains an open question: “High among questions and criticisms regarding the transnational lens on migration are issues as to how members of second and subsequent generations are affected by transnationalism. There is one common view that transnational practices among second-generation youth are currently minimal and likely to dwindle further in the course of time” (Vertovec 2009: 75). Research on multi-ethnic youth in London (e.g. Cheshire et al. 2011) has certainly shown an extremely local embedding of language practices that could quickly displace transnational affiliations altogether.

So how and why do some British South Asians continue to signal an element of transnational belonging—not just in terms of expressed affiliations but actual language practices (e.g. accent)—more than half a century after their parents migrated to the UK? I develop a model for contact between language ideologies in order to understand complex diversity in such groups: accent differences according to class, generation, even life stage; the shift from material to ideological conduits of transnational influence over time; and the selective long-term retention of only some transnational speech forms.

I start by noting the error of modeling migration as the entry of a ‘tabula rasa’ individual into a preexisting social-ideological space. Rather, we should think of a meeting of two spaces. Indian migrants do not simply enter the classic pyramidal class-based hierarchy of British dialect variation (Ward 1929, in Trudgill 2002) and try to find their place in it. In terms of English use, their experience of contact involves the meeting of at least two such ideological systems, the British structure and an Indian English pyramid, which itself now incorporates a standard-vernacular/L2 opposition. This combines two vertical ‘up-down’ class binaries (Rampton 2011) with a horizontal ‘we-they’ dimension (Gumperz 1982; Rampton 2011), i.e. differentiation by ethnic or national group.

I use this model to account for two sociolinguistic developments in the London Punjabi community, based on fieldwork and recordings from 42 individuals. First, we see the use of British and Indian accent forms shifting from ‘we-they’ meanings to ‘up-down’ meanings from first to second generation speakers, indicating a shift from peripheral to central participation in the British system. Second, and somewhat in contrast, we see long-term use of transnational (Indian) speech styles by selected individuals. The model frames this as a choice between competing positions within the two pyramids. The ‘inexplicably’ long-term retention of Indian accent forms that carry low prestige in the British ‘pyramid’ can be understood through their growing prestige within Indian ideological spaces. For some lower middle class individuals this represents a new form of social mobility: cultivating an educated Indian English can transcend their British class positioning by invoking the perceived recent global prestige of a particular class of wealthy, transnational Indian. Thus, despite a measurable decline in material ties to India over time, the ideological value of such ties for certain individuals leads to long-term use of higher-prestige Indian English forms.