

Stylistic activation in ethnolinguistic repertoires
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Recent characterizations of ethnolinguistic repertoires have been stated in terms of agency and ethnic identity e.g. ‘a fluid set of linguistic resources that members of an ethnic group may use variably as they index their ethnic identities’ (Benor 2010: 159). In this talk I examine whether ethnolinguistic traits are consistently “fluid” and agentively used across community members, and whether they typically index or “express ethnic identity” (Hoffman and Walker 2010: 37). The study examines the use of four English phonetic variables (/t/, the FACE vowel, the GOAT vowel, /l/) by London Asians across three levels (interview, repertoire, discourse). Four of these variables have characteristic British and Asian variants, allowing an exploration of the deployment of ethnolinguistic traits. Detailed analysis is presented of eight sample individuals (from a corpus of 74), two each from four second generation demographic groups: older men, older women, younger men, and younger women. I first show that selected individuals have similar overall rates if solely interview recordings are compared, as is the practice in much sociolinguistic research. However, closer analysis of two types of variation—across settings and within discourse—reveals underlying differences in usage, suggesting different indexical values despite similar rates of use.

First, expanding out from interview data to individual repertoires consisting of several interactional settings, we find that some individuals have highly differentiated repertoires, alternating British styles in one context with Asian styles in another, and exhibit finely tuned multilectal skill. Others vary much less across setting and instead appear to have a more fixed, fused use of British and Asian variants. Second, focusing in on variation within discourse, we find that selected individuals show a high degree of dynamic focusing of British or Asian style in relation to shifts in stance, footing, or narrative structure (Rampton and Sharma 2011); once again we find that others who share the same overall mix of variants vary much less across discourse segments. Degree of ‘stylistic activation’ at the levels of setting and discourse appears to be asymmetrically linked: A high level of activation in discourse entails a high level of activation across settings but not vice versa, a pattern that recalls Bell’s (1984) Style Axiom.

The two analyses show that: (a) two broad types of repertoire exist among London Asians—differentiated and fused—and only the former involves genuinely “fluid” and strategic use; (b) when they are stylistically activated, ethnolinguistic traits do not simply “index ethnicity”, but rather stance, footing, class, and a range of other meanings only tenuously linked to ethnicity (Cf. Eckert 2008). The reason an individual has a differentiated or fused repertoire lies in the socio-historical locus of their demographic group within the community more than in mere individual choice. The findings suggest that the study of ethnolinguistic features cannot assume agentive use for identity functions in all cases. Methodologically, it shows the need to attend to relative stylistic activation as much as to mere frequencies of use. Finally, similarities to Auer’s (1999) typology of bilingual code-switching suggests implications for understanding change over time.