

Everyday antiracism in ethnolinguistic crossing and stylisation ¹

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Abstract

In Britain in the late 1980s and 1990s, a number of researchers committed to countering racism argued that during the previous decade, anti-racism had been too doctrinaire, and that instead, it was essential to listen carefully to what people actually say and do in their everyday lives. The work I shall describe in this article follows this line, but it adds an important complication. People don't just manage their social relationships through explicit verbal statements. Important processes of inter-ethnic negotiation also take place in indirect and symbolic ways,² which it can be hard to access and appreciate in the kinds of rational debate that often advocated in educational and other kinds of public discourse.

In this article, I shall discuss my research on ethnically mixed friendship groups in an English neighbourhood where there was a substantial population with roots in the Indian subcontinent. My sociolinguistic analyses concentrated on youngsters of African Caribbean and Anglo descent using Punjabi, youngsters of Punjabi and Anglo descent using Caribbean Creole, and all three using a form of stylised Asian English. Focusing on language 'crossing' and 'stylisation' like this, I was able to collect a lot of evidence on the ways in which youngsters used language and the tiny details of talk to negotiate ethnic difference and race division, and in the first section, I will provide a glimpse of my findings. After that, I shall offer an interpretation of the antiracism that this involved, and I shall conclude with some implications.³

Summary

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1. Description

Here are three examples of the 11-16-year-olds making spontaneous use of one another's ethnic languages.

Extract I

A game of badminton doubles between good friends at the youth club. Peter (14, male, Anglo descent) is playing with Chris (14, male, Anglo descent) against Imran (15, male, Pakistani descent) and Richard (15, male, Anglo). In line 7, he puts on a strong Indian accent when he notes the score.

1. Chris((to Peter)): what you doin
2. Peter: PLAYING BADMINTON
3. Chris: could have fooled me
4. ? ()
5. Rich: go on you ser|ve
6. Imran: |()
7. Peter ((loudly, in a strong Indian accent)): ONE NIL
8. Imran: love- love one

¹ A version of this paper appears in Mica Pollock (ed) [Forthcoming] *Everyday Antiracism: Concrete Strategies for Successfully Navigating the Relevance of Race in School*, New York: The New Press

² See the reading in Harris & Rampton (eds) 2003.

³ All of these examples are discussed in much more detail in Rampton 1995/2004.

Adolescents often used stylised Indian English, but formal games of any kind - cards, badminton, soccer, cricket, pool - served as a very special context. *Outside* games, in the course of ordinary informal activity (standing around in dinner queues, walking around the corridors or playground), Punjabi bilinguals frequently put on stylised Indian English to criticise other kids' non-conformities and misdemeanours (wearing unusual clothes, pushing into queues, drinking in the wrong parts of the building, etc.). In these non-game contexts, stylised Indian English worked as a voice of negative sanctioning – it evoked connotations of bumbling incompetence and attributed this to the non-conformists being picked out. These connotations can be traced back to stereotypes of 'babu' developed during British rule in India; sometimes, black, white and Punjabi youngsters used this kind of 'babu' English in overtly racist taunts directed at youngsters with Bangladeshi roots (the minority group who had arrived most recently); and it was because they'd sound racist if they used the language like this that youngsters of white Anglo and black Caribbean descent hardly ever directed this kind of critical Indian English towards Punjabi friends. *Games*, however, changed this. In games, stylised Indian English became a language of *positive* sanctioning: here, it was used as a language of commentary, it featured in praise and encouragement ('very good shot'), and when it was used to announce the score in badminton or a change of suit at blackjack, it helped everyone to keep or find their bearings. Stylised Indian English still connoted remoteness from the main currents of multi-ethnic adolescent youth culture, but whereas before this was something to be scorned, in games this detachment became much more altruistic and authoritative, placing the speaker at some remove from the competitors' concentrated struggle for advantage, emphasizing rules and ideals which all the players had contracted to but that their enthusiasm about winning would always make vulnerable. Games, furthermore, were the one context in which white youngsters used quite a lot of Indian English to single out Punjabi bilingual peers.

The next example involves Creole:

Extract 2

Asif (15, male, Pakistani descent) and Alan (15, male, Anglo descent) are in dinner-time detention. Ms Jameson (25+, female, Anglo descent), the teacher who put them there, needs to leave the room to collect her lunch.

1. MsJ: I'll be back in a second
2. with my lunch| ()
3. Asif: |[NO ((*loud tut*)) dat's sad man
4. (I'll b
5. I | had to miss my play right I've gotta go
6. Alan: | (with mine) (2.5)
7. ((*Ms J must now have left the room*))
8. Asif ((*Creole influenced*)): llunch (.) you don't need no lunch
9. | not'n grow anyway ((*laughs*))
10. Alan: | ((*laughs*))
11. Asif: have you ate your lunch Alan

In this extract, Asif complains about Ms Jameson's imminent departure (line 3), he makes a vain (and ignored) gesture of leaving himself (line 5), and then, when the teacher has gone and with Alan the only audience, he produces (an imaginary) put-down, deriding the teacher's diminutive size (lines 7-8). Creole plays a significant but shifting part in Asif's performance here, and it is quite difficult to know whether and where he moves out of his normal vernacular speech into Creole/Black English. In his final display of resilience, Asif's stretched and heavily emphasised 'L' in line 7 resembles a black speech feature noted in South London,⁴ and in line 8 he combines a distinctively Creole pronunciation of 'not' with a rapidity of delivery which was sometimes associated with Asians and whites trying to use Black English ('not gonna grow' becomes 'not'n grow'). But in line 3, his 'dat', 'sad' and 'man' are more ambiguous. They all look like they might be deliberately Creole, but these were also common features in Asif's ordinary vernacular speech.

In Extract 1 Peter's switch into stylised Indian English was fairly clear-cut, but the Creole in Asif's speech seems more permeating: it is 'turned up' to maximum intensity in lines 7 and

⁴ Hewitt 1986:134

8, but it is also an ambiguous presence early on. This blurring of the line between Creole and everyday vernacular English is closely linked to the fact that for many youngsters, Creole and Black English symbolised excitement and excellence in youth culture. As a symbolic 'voice' Creole was a linguistic variety that many adolescents aspired to - one informant even referred to it as 'future language'- and this led to a much more intimate intermingling of ordinary speech with Creole than with Indian English voices.

The third example comes from a discussion of Punjabi *bhangra* music:

Extract 3

Sally (15, female, Anglo descent) has joined Gurmit (15, female, Indian descent) and some of her friends (including AnonA, a white female) who are listening to some bhangra tapes outside. Sally has been told that the cassette they're listening to belongs to Lorraine (15, female, Anglo) who is currently a little way off.

1. Sally: ((calling out)): OH LORRAINE
2. |EH LORRAINE HAS IT GOT **KENOO NUNOO** ON it
3. ?: |()
4. ?: | you want the other side
5. AnonA: it's got ((singing)) **holle holle**
6. Sally: ((sings)): **o kennoo mennoo I love** -
7. Gurmit: oh that

Sally had developed an enthusiasm for bhangra through Imran, her boyfriend, and there is a hint of competition in the way in which she and the other white girl (AnonA) refer to different bhangra songs. At the same time, Gurmit's *blasé* and unreceptive "oh that" points to the way in which Punjabi bilinguals were often sceptical when whites talked about *bhangra*. A complex and prestigious movement was developing around bhangra, with Punjabi youngsters acting as the inheritors and interpreters of adult tradition, and the knowledge and abilities associated with it were too highly valued for generous treatment to be given to the claims to familiarity made by people with only rather dubious credentials. Nevertheless, a number of non-Punjabis – mainly white girls – seemed happy to accept the novice status that an interest in bhangra entailed.

In fact there was another style of interethnic Punjabi which was much more common among boys. Punjabi had become part of the language and lore of multiracial playground culture, and it figured in variations on the verbal traps, games and taunts documented by the Opies (1959). It was quite common, for example, for Punjabi bilinguals to invite black and white friends to respond to utterances that contained Punjabi elements which lay just beyond their linguistic grasp, and for the monolingual recipient, the challenge was to dodge whatever traps were being laid, defeating the bilingual with a display of quicker wits and unexpected skills (Punjabi bilinguals would say "say 'me tutti khunda' ((trans: 'I eat shit'))", or "say it to him 'meri maadi _____' ((trans: my mum's _____))". With bhangra, youngsters wanted to move towards the heartlands of ethnic youth culture, and acceptance into the Punjabi community was at issue. But in playground japes, Punjabi was just one more element in an open field of play, where the key themes were competitive challenge, trickery and triumph.

What was going on in all of this?

2. Interpretation

Acts of ethnolinguistic crossing and stylization varied a good deal in the way they were taken and intended, and their meanings were sensitive to the stage and state of talk, the activity, the institutional setting, the relationship between the participants and so forth. So for a proper answer to the question like 'what was going on?', you first need to look very closely at each episode. But having done that (in my book), I offer the following interpretation.

With the important and limiting exception of Asian English used to taunt Bangladeshi youngsters, ethno-linguistic crossing and stylisation challenged 'ethnic absolutism' (Gilroy 1987). Ethnic absolutism assumes that (i) a person's ethnicity is fixed, if not from their birth, then at least during their early home experience, and (ii) that ethnicity is the most important part of his or her identity, overshadowing or erasing gender, class, region,

occupation etc. Ethnic absolutism neglects the ways in which culture can be both maintained *and created afresh* in the endless processes of communicative interaction, and it instead conceives of 'cultures' as a set of rather static, separate, ethnic units.

If ethnic absolutism had been dominant in the way that youngsters conceived of the world around them, language crossing and stylisation would have been unacceptable, a ceaseless form of local conflict. It wasn't. Instead, crossing generally developed in solidarities and allegiances that were based in a range of *non-ethnic* identities – identities of neighbourhood, class, gender, age, institutional role, recreational interest etc - and for a lot of adolescents, ethno-linguistic crossing went some way towards symbolising multi-ethnic youth community. In line with this, they quite often cited language crossing to illustrate the ways in which friends with different ethnic backgrounds might be "one of us", "in our sort of community".

But the critique of ethnic absolutism implicit in language crossing didn't mean that ethnicity was meaningless. Inherited ethnicity still played quite a significant role in the formation of friendship groups, and its unfair influence on employment opportunities, education, housing and wealth was well recognised. In fact, language crossing seemed to involve a rather subtle combination of both respect and disregard for ethnic differences.

Respect for the ethnic boundaries was shown in two ways. First, by *not* crossing in certain contexts. Black and white adolescents seldom used Asian English to make fun of Punjabi friends, and most whites and Asians either avoided or made little use of Creole in the company of black peers. Second, crossing generally only occurred in moments, activities and relationships when the constraints of ordinary social order were relaxed and when normal social relations couldn't be taken for granted.

In Extract 1, Peter uses Asian English in a formal game, where the rules of ordinary life are always partially suspended, and which many scholars have describe as a 'charmed circle'⁵; in Extract 2, Asif's Creole articulates his sense that the rules of fair conduct have been breached; and Extract 3 involves musical performance, where the rules of ordinary life are also always partially relaxed. This intimate association between crossing and time-out from ordinary social relations means that crossing never actually claimed that the speaker was 'really' black or Asian - it didn't finally imply that the crosser could move unproblematically in and out of their friends' heritage language in any new kind of open bicultural language switching. In addition, the siting of these acts in de-conventionalised moments and marginal spaces meant that in the social structures which were dominant and which adolescent finally treated as normal, the boundaries around ethnicity were relatively fixed. In this way, the use of someone else's ethnic language acknowledged that the speaker's rights to do so were ultimately only conditional/temporary, and overall, this suggests quite a subtle process of political negotiation involved in ethnolinguistic crossing and stylisation.

In excess, both an acceptance of ethnic difference *and* a disregard for it can slip into injustice, which can be defined as either (a) treating people the same when in relevant respects they are different, and/or as (b) treating them as different when in relevant respects they are similar.⁶ For adolescents in this multilingual peer group, unrestricted use of someone else's language could be seen as the first kind of injustice, displaying the insensitivity to difference found elsewhere in ethnocentrism, 'colour blindness' etc. On the other hand, if an individual resisted every temptation to experiment with an outgroup variety, they might also find that they had succumbed to the second injustice and to the absolutism that sees people sealed in separate ethnic boxes. Language crossing generally wove a path between these two forms of racism. Through it, adolescents actively explored the waterline where forms that were ethnic or multiracial overlapped and intermingled, while at the same time, they normally only brought out what they'd improvised or newly acquired in places where it could be safely understood that they weren't making any claims to real, equal or enduring membership of an ethnic outgroup.

3. Implications

Just as our discourses and communicative actions never mean only one thing, it would be foolish to attribute everyday antiracism to all forms of ethnolinguistic crossing and stylisation. The speech acts I've described emerged through sensitive negotiations about the

⁵ See e.g. Hewitt 1986:178 and Sutton-Smith 1982

⁶ See Halstead 1988:154.

significance of ethnicity situated in long-term friendship and neighbourhood co-residence, but the commercial marketisation of ethnic forms, products and symbols as commodities, life-style options and art-objects gives rise to very different dynamics,⁷ and in some cases, racism is the most striking feature.⁸ Even so, there is plenty of evidence that practices like the ones I have described occur in a lot of other urban British settings,⁹ and there are good grounds for seeing small acts like these as significant contributions to the emergence of what Stuart Hall calls 'new ethnicities' founded in "a new cultural politics which engages rather than suppresses difference... [These ethnicities are not] doomed to survive, as Englishness was, only by marginalising, dispossessing, displacing and forgetting other ethnicities, [but are instead...] predicated on difference and diversity" (1988: 2).

For teachers and youth workers, there seems to be at least three implications:

- The assumption in a lot of British educational discourse that harmonious race relations at school depend on the influence of teachers is obviously wrong. Aggression and hostility are not the only ways in which children and adolescents respond to ethnic difference when left to their own devices.
- Equally, it would be a mistake to assume that interethnic respect can only be expressed in the kind of polite and cooperative conduct prized in class (even though this can make a very valuable contribution). The jokes, nonsense, gossip, rowdiness, games and fashions that youngsters enjoy when they're let out from the mainly serious and often boring business of lessons can also serve as important sites sustaining anti-racism.
- But just as plainly, teachers themselves often understand very well the cultural dynamics of the environments where they live and work, and can be highly adept not just at turning a deaf ear to the kinds of non-official talk that can oil inter-ethnic peer relations, but also actively supporting it in jokes and banter. And to turn this understanding into more systematic curriculum interventions, they might do well to follow my informants' strategy of siting their adventures into ethnic difference in moments and spaces where the norms and constraints of everyday life are partially suspended, exploiting drama, literature and music as frameworks in which students can move back from ordinary reality, reworking it and exploring the alternatives.

4. References

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⁷ See Cutler 2003

⁸ See Hill 2003.

⁹ See Back 2003.

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